

VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs ★ Volume 3, Issue 9 ★ December 2023



★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

The Agency had a tremendous year in 2023 as demand for Veterans Service Officers assistance continued to soar, especially following the implementation of the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxic Acts of 2022 (PACT Act). At this point, there is more than \$2 billion in VA compensation and pension coming into our state every year

In our state veterans' homes, admissions are increasing and over \$300 million is being invested to rebuild the facilities that serve veterans—at a time when they need it the most. We also celebrated our labor partners with a new contract that saw pay increases of nearly 18 percent over the life of the contract plus, a \$1200 stipend for every member of the bargaining unit.

On the education front, our team helped navigate thousands of veterans through the process and over \$300 million of federal education benefits made their way to our state.

Our success relies on the efforts of an incredibly dedicated and talented group of people who deliver on the Agency's mission to help veterans and their families thrive in Illinois. These victories for veterans also rely on an interconnected network of service providers including (in addition to IDVA), Illinois Joining Forces, the Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions, Illinois Veterans Advisory Committee, and thousands of government and veteran service organizations. Together, we are all-in for Illinois Veterans, their families, survivors, and caregivers.

2024 promises to be an even better year. Your Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs will continue to expand to reach veterans where they are. Check our February edition for a major announcement from the Agency. Until then, Happy New Year and thank you for being a part of this incredible journey of service where we make a difference in the lives of the veterans, their families, the community, and each other.

Happy New Year!

Terry Prince

U.S. Navy Veteran and IDVA Director

Gold Star Christmas Tree Lighting at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library



The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Displays Gold Star Family Christmas Tree

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) is host to Illinois' Gold Star Family Christmas Tree; the first tree dedicated only to Gold Star families. The tree was lit by Governor JB Pritzker on December 4th in a ceremony attended by the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs Director Terry Prince, Major General Richard Neely, and Gold Star Families. The tree holds 349 ornaments, each holding the name of a hero who died in combat.

"The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) generously agreed to display the Gold Star Family Tree," said IDVA Director Terry Prince. "We are grateful for their partnership in ensuring that the tree is available for visitors through the month of December to remember and reflect on those lives that were lost protecting our nation."

"The ALPLM is honored to display the Gold Star Family Tree," said Christina Shutt, executive director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. "President Lincoln deeply appreciated the sacrifices of America's military personnel and the pain it caused their families, so it's especially appropriate to have this tree on display in a museum dedicated to his legacy."

For more information on the Gold Star Tree, please view this video: <https://veterans.illinois.gov/>.

The ALPLM is a must-see for those curious about our nation's history and President Lincoln. It mixes high-tech showmanship and traditional scholarship to tell the story of America's greatest president. The museum takes visitors to key scenes in Lincoln's life, from reading by firelight in a tiny cabin to debating the Emancipation Proclamation. Theatrical presentations explore Lincoln's life and the importance of studying history while using special effects to keep audiences on the edge of their seats. The library houses one of the world's greatest collections of Lincoln material, as well as some 13 million items from all eras of Illinois history. More than five million people have visited the ALPLM since it opened in 2005. For more information on admissions, special events, and programs, visit: <https://presidentlincoln.illinois.gov/>.



Governor JB Pritzker, Director Terry Prince, and Gold Star families decorate the Gold Star Christmas Tree.

Monthly Spotlight

Operation Rising Spirit and Museum

Over 10,000 cards were distributed to the Veterans' Home across Illinois in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteo, and Quincy. Thank you to the many organizations, businesses, families, and individuals who participated in bringing joy to the veterans in our care.



JOIN THE EFFORT

OPERATION RISING SPIRIT



Director Terry Prince and Senior Program Policy Advisor Crystal Womack accept thousands of notes of gratitude for veterans in the IDVA residential homes.



Director Terry Prince, Deputy Governor Grace Hou, and Chief of Staff LaTanya Law. Deputy Governor Hou visited the IDVA Central Office after her recent appointment as Deputy Governor for Health and Human Services. Before her appointment, she served as the Secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services.



Director Prince carries the wreath for the Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day in Springfield.



Veterans' Home at Quincy Construction Update

Director Prince visited the Veterans' Home at Quincy for an update on its nearly \$300 million renovation and rehabilitation project which is 75 percent completed. The project includes a new 260,000-square-foot residential long-term care facility with 210 skilled care beds with full amenities for its residents. A new 80,000-square-foot independent living building, referred to as a domiciliary, will host 80 independent living units, with accommodations large enough for resident spouses. Additionally, campus buildings, infrastructure, and utilities will be rehabilitated, and landscaping will be planted to support the new facilities. The project provides for the demolition of six existing buildings, and renovation of the Neilson Dining Facility to include a multi-purpose space, administrative offices, and stores.

Dave Clifford, Chief Engineer for the Home, toured the construction site with Director Prince and revealed the intricate design of the buildings including an underground tunnel, reminiscent of Disney World, where deliveries, laundry, and meal preparation all happen behind the scenes. The state-of-the-art facility has massive windows to bring an abundance of light into the domiciliary and skilled nursing rooms, and the dining rooms and living areas overlook what will be beautiful landscapes.

A grand opening celebration will take place later this year.



Veterans' Home at Quincy construction 75 percent completed.



Dave Clifford, Veterans' Home at Quincy Chief Engineer, tours the construction site with Director Terry Prince.



Veterans' Home at Quincy Welcomes New Administrator



Charles (Chuck) Newton joined the Veterans' Home at Quincy on December 18th as its new Administrator after serving as the Executive Director and Administrator of the Beacon Hill (Lifespace) Home in Lombard, IL. With over 35 years of

experience in senior living, Chuck has worked to improve the quality of life for seniors through his service in communities dedicated to the mission of caring. Chuck has been the chair of LeadingAge which advocates for fair funding and quality care. He has worked in a variety of organizations throughout the state including Good Samaritan Home in Quincy.

"Through his leadership, the Home will continue delivering high-quality, individual, compassionate care while also carrying out the final phases of the transformative construction project," said Director Prince. "Chuck brings experience, understanding, and dedication to the Veterans' Home at Quincy."

Chuck earned his bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater. He is married with two children, and he and his wife Lea live in Quincy. He enjoys auto mechanics, travel, and the opportunity to spend time with his wife, children, and grandchildren.

Rick Gengenbacher, Adjutant of the Veterans' Home at Quincy, Retires

After 36 years with the Veterans' Home at Quincy, Adjutant Rick Gengenbacher retired leaving behind a rich legacy. Rick joined the Home as a student worker in 1987. Throughout his long career at the Home, he primarily served as the public information officer where he coordinated several significant public events for the Quincy community including veteran celebrations and memorials. He also published the Home's newsletter the Bugle, managed its close circuit television station, and handled media relations. Rick was instrumental in planning celebrations for the residents, staff, and retirees and was deeply engaged with the veterans, staff, and the community. Rick was known for his work behind the scenes to ensure that events and programs were well-run, attended, supported, and enjoyed.

"Rick's passion and thoughtfulness was an integral asset to the Veterans' Home at Quincy," said Director Prince. "The veterans faces lit up when he entered a room. We are grateful for his years of service and wish him well in his next adventure."



Rick with former Home Administrator Richard "Hap" Northern who was the Administrator when Rick was hired as a student worker in 1987.

Veterans' Homes

The Veterans' Homes Celebrate the Holidays



The leadership team at the Veterans' Home at Chicago enjoy the first annual Cookie Decorating party with their residents.



James and Anita Wilkins celebrating Christmas at the Veterans' Home at Quincy.



Veterans' Home at Anna resident Gerald Fanger enjoying holiday cheer.



Veterans' Home at Manteno resident Leroy Schweitzer is greeted by Santa.



Veteran Service Officer Anthony Hernandez and veteran Jeff Lewis, winner of the wooden flag raffle, at the IDVA Lockport Veteran Resource Fair.

New Veteran Service Officers



Yuridany Reyes, a five-year U.S. Navy veteran, joins IDVA assigned to the southwest office located at 8658 S Sacramento Avenue, Chicago. Yuridany comes to IDVA from the DCFS where she was an investigator. She earned a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in education from Loyola University Chicago.



Amos Griffin, Marine Corps and Army Reserve veteran joins the IDVA Belleville location. He served in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He is currently earning his bachelor's degree in Hospital Management at Southern New Hampshire University where he is a member of the Military Fraternity Kappa Lambda Chi Military. He and his wife have five children and four grandchildren.



Alfredo (Freddy) Rocha, a U.S. Army veteran, joins the IDVA Sangamon County (Springfield) office. He and his family moved to Springfield from Seattle following his 20-year military career. He was a Paratrooper with the 82nd and a member of the 3rd Stryker Brigade during Operation Iraqi Freedom 1 and the Surge into Baghdad. He is an active member of the VFW and a service officer for Chatham-Auburn Memorial VFW post 4763. He has three children and three adopted children.



Jordan Heap, a U.S. Army veteran, joins the IDVA Bloomington office. He served six years at Fort Stewart, Rose Barracks Germany, and Fort Knox. He was deployed to Baghdad, Iraq. Before joining IDVA, he worked in the Champaign Child Support Office. His wife Maria is a U.S. Navy veteran.

Veterans' Home at Chicago Administrator Selected for Governor's Office Academy of Leadership Program



T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson, Administrator for the Veterans' Home at Chicago, was selected for the

2024 Governor's Office Academy of Leadership (G.O.A.L.). The 30-person cohort was selected from hundreds of applicants by a multi-agency selection panel. The diverse pool of leaders represent a cross section of agencies across the State.

"T'Kira has demonstrated extraordinary leadership managing the opening of the Veterans' Home at Chicago and continues to ensure that it runs effectively and efficiently" said Director Prince. "We are proud of

her selection and look forward to her broadening her skills through The G.O.A.L. program."

The 11-month G.O.A.L. program was created with the mission of advancing public service leadership. It is designed to increase leadership skillsets, facilitate social learning, broaden and expand perspectives, and build long-term networks across agencies. Throughout the program, participants will engage in a collaborative learning environment centered on improving leadership effectiveness to become better stewards of the public trust and discover ways to better support customer centered government services.

Central Office celebrates the holidays



Front row L-R: Amanda Gray, Carla Rapps, Nakesha Rice, Jackie Hughes, Danielle Luevano; Back row L-R: Steph Heckenkamp, Anita Wiley, LaTanya Law, Deb Wygant, Leah Thomas, Kim Yantis

Metro Division celebrates the holidays



L-R: Shynae Murphy, Cynthia McKee, Nyeema Davis, Director Prince, Michelle Richards, Malon Norfleet, Charletta Hayes, Robert Iverson, Anthony Hernandez, Claudia Bautista, Charles Bosko, Yuridany Reyes, and Gerald Enriquez.

Do you have a Compliment, Recommendation, Question, or Complaint?

Illinois Veterans' Accountability Unit (VAU)

Let us Know!

If you are an Illinois Veteran or other Illinois resident who seeks services from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA); a resident of any Illinois Veterans' Home, a family member of a resident, a visitor of any Illinois Veterans' Home; a vendor and/or contractor of the IDVA; or staff of the IDVA, we want to hear from you.

This office welcomes feedback about the services being provided to the Veterans of Illinois. If you received exceptional service or have concerns about poor performance involving any member of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, please let us know.

Email us at

IDVA.accountability@illinois.gov

or Call our Toll-Free Helpline

1-855-660-7011

More information about the VAU can be found on the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs website

<https://veterans.illinois.gov/>

The VAU maintains the confidentiality of investigations, complainants, and witnesses to the maximum extent allowable, but must disclose complaints to the Office of the Executive Inspector General (OEIG).

You can obtain more information about the OEIG or file a complaint with the OEIG directly through its website at <https://oeig.illinois.gov/>.

Our mission at the IDVA is very simple. To serve those who have served. In doing so, we serve not only the men and women who have worn the uniform, but also their families. It is our privilege to be able to help our veterans receive the benefits they have earned through service to our nation. Our goal is to empower our veterans and their families to thrive in all aspects of their lives.

We know there are many veterans within our great state who do not require any assistance – but we still want to encourage you to “Stand Up and Be Counted!” by registering with your local VSO. In doing so, you’re helping IDVA to do a better job of planning for services, seeking federal funding and understanding the needs of our veteran communities statewide. Click here to register.

We thank you for your service and for your sacrifice and we at the IDVA look forward to offering our services to you.



Illinois Department of
Veterans' Affairs

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