

VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs ★ Volume 3, Issue 1 ★ January 2023



★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

Happy New Year! IDVA has headed into 2023 with an abundance of enthusiasm for serving Illinois' Veterans. Earlier this month, the constitutional officers were sworn in for another four years of service. Their inauguration marks a new beginning – the inaugural moment where anything is possible. I feel the same way about IDVA – anything is possible. We are looking at 2023 as a new opportunity to lead the nation in service to our veterans and their families. We are building on the progress we have made in expanding the number of Veteran Service Officers, opening more offices, and enhancing our technology. Our VSOs are better equipped to work effectively and efficiently. As Veterans themselves, they understand how it feels to navigate the process. They work one-on-one with a Veteran to learn about their individual needs and goals whether its employment, housing, or education. They are committed to leaving no stone unturned. If you are a Veteran seeking guidance, please reach out to one of our Veteran Service Officers. You can find one near you on our website: <https://www2.illinois.gov/veterans/Pages/ServiceOffices.aspx>

In this issue of Veterans Connections, you will learn more about construction progress at the Veterans' Home at Quincy, exciting upcoming events, helpful resources, and IDVA happenings.

As always, thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

Terry Prince
IDVA Director



Veterans' Home at Quincy



Beam Topping Out Ceremony

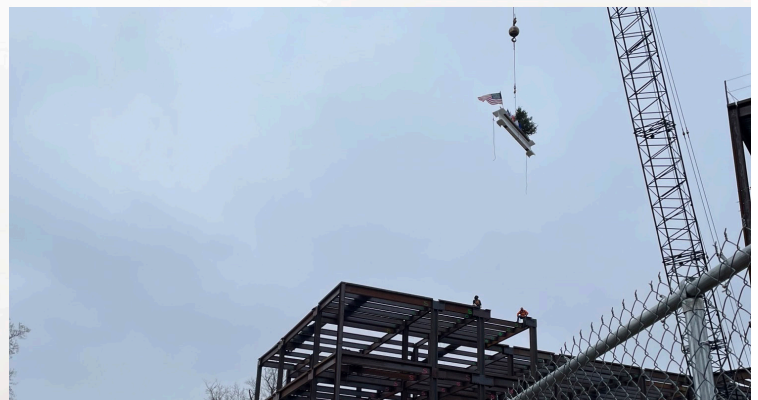
The final structural beam was placed at the Veterans' Home at Quincy at a ceremony featuring Governor JB Pritzker, IDVA Director Terry Prince, Capital Development Board Executive Director Jim Underwood, and Home Superintendent Troy Culbertson on January 12th. The Topping Out Ceremony marked a significant milestone in the nearly \$300 million renovation and rehabilitation project that will provide a 260,000 square foot residential long-term care facility and 80,000 square foot independent living facility to Illinois veterans.

During the Topping Out Ceremony, the last structural beam which had been signed by residents, staff, construction workers, and dignitaries was raised and placed at the top of the long-term care facility. The scope of work for the Quincy Veterans' Home includes a campus rehabilitation to buildings, infrastructure, utilities, and landscaping 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. The long-term care facility is projected to house 210 skilled care beds, with full amenities for its residents. The independent living building, referred to as a domiciliary, will host 80 independent living units, with accommodations large enough for resident spouses and children.



Troy Culbertson, Superintendent of the Veteran's Home at Quincy, tours model rooms with Governor JB Pritzker.

"Illinois continues to ensure veterans and their families thrive in our state. By building this new Veterans' Home on the hallowed grounds of Quincy, our treasured heroes will live in a brand-new, state-of-the-art facility on a truly historic campus." said IDVA Director Terry Prince. "The continued investment in the five Veterans' Homes across Illinois represents the State's commitment to Veterans and their families. We are grateful for the Governor's support, the work of the Capital Development Board and finally, our incredible partners on the construction team for addressing the unique needs of Veterans and the Home."



2022 Employee of the Year

Anthony Hernandez **Veteran Service Officer**

Anthony Hernandez, Veteran Service Officer, was awarded the IDVA Employee of the Year Award for 2022 for going above and beyond his main duties of preparing disability claims for submission to the VA by handling 23 additional cases of constituent concerns from the Governor's office and other elected officials. He also stepped in to support several itinerant offices in Cook County and surrounding communities. He is well known in the community through his regular attendance at local Veteran events and resource fairs. Finally, he works hard to find the right answers for Veterans and their families. Anthony represents the ideals of TEAM IDVA by placing Veterans and their families at the center of everything we do.

Please join me in congratulating Anthony and all the nominees for their incredible work. They represent the best IDVA has to offer.

Nominees:

*Chad Ballinger – Quincy Home, Kenneth Bonner – Field Division, Tanya Fordahl – Manteno Home, Allison Fox – LaSalle Home
Jill Giovanine – LaSalle Home, David Hall – Quincy Home, Anthony Hernandez – Field Division, Alfred Hollis – Prince Home
Bill Hunt – IDVA HQ Springfield, Lindsey Kelley – Quincy Home, George Ruiz – Manteno Home, Michelle Shear – Manteno Home
Laura Torres – Manteno Home, Jessica Williams – Quincy Home*



CONGRATULATIONS

2022

EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

Anthony Hernandez

VETERAN SERVICE OFFICER

THANK YOU FOR ALWAYS PLACING VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES AT THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING YOU DO.

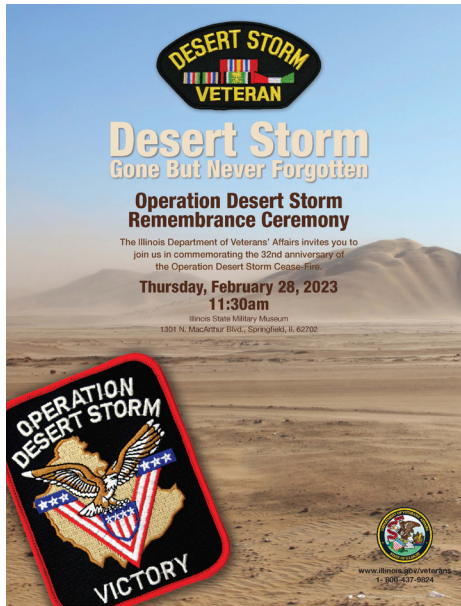




Monthly Highlights



Operation Desert Storm 32nd Remembrance Day Ceremony



February 28, 2023, marks the 32nd anniversary to the end of the Persian Gulf War.

On April 11, 1991, less than 90 days after the U.S.-led offensive against Iraq, known as Operation Desert Storm, began. The United Nations Security Council declared

the conditions of Resolution 687 in effect, making the cease fire official and formally ending the Persian Gulf War. The definitive victory elevated the United States as the preeminent global superpower and the number one partner of choice for its allies around the world.

More than 700,000 American soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen served in Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Of that number, 467 were reported wounded and 374 paid the ultimate sacrifice, two whose remains have yet to come home. Illinois pays tribute to 18 service members lost during this time. Even now, we may never know the total cost of the conflict as Gulf War illness and other effects of toxic exposure continue to take the lives of those who served there.

Gwen Diehl Retires

Gwen M. Diehl, Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs Veteran Home Coordinator, retired in December after almost 27 years of service with the department. Gwen served many roles since 1996 including Data Entry Clerk, Administrative Assistant to Deputy Directors and Senior Public Service Administrators, and her most recent role where she conducted long-term planning for future capital projects including the building of the new Chicago home and new construction at the Quincy Home. Diehl also served six years on the United States Department of Veterans Affairs Women's Advisory Committee.

Diehl joined the Army in 1972 where she participated in Basic Training at Ft. McClellan, Alabama and Intensive Training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Her stateside assignments brought her around the country including Fort Leonard Wood Missouri, Fort Bliss, Texas, Barstow, California and Indianapolis Indiana. Abroad, she was assigned to New Ulm, Heidelberg/Schwetzingen, Ansbach, Germany, and Iraq.

Diehl was deployed to Support Squadron to Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm in Iraq and was the

oldest of 34 women who deployed into the combat theater with the Support Squadron. She maintained continuity of operations for personnel services mail operations, and Red Cross/Emergency leave procedures. She served in the deployed Rear Attachment three miles from the Iraq Border. She is a recipient of the Bronze Star for her valiant efforts.



Gwen Diehl celebrates her retirement with IDVA staff and her husband Ricky Reed.



Monthly Highlights



Activities Professionals Day

Did you know that the lifespan of Americans has increased in recent years, and due to this, there is a great need for patient-centered eldercare? This is where activity professionals come in. January 27th is Activities Professionals Day where we recognize our professionals in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy for enriching the lives of the Veterans in our care. Because of their creativity and enthusiasm, Veterans' lives are more interesting, engaging, and fun! Thank you for all you do.



Veterans' Home at LaSalle Activities Professionals: Left: Bailie Bongartz-Activities Therapist Right: Susan Scully-Volunteer Coordinator



Veterans' Home at Manteno Activities Professionals
Front row L to R: Rachel Cunnington, Erin Keenan, Izzy Andrade, Brenda Jones-Copeland Back row L to R: Krista Hagler, Alison Skaggs, Laura Bernal, Pat Smith (Not pictured: Patty Stroner)*



Quincy Activity Professionals Team: Whittany Flambeau, Tammy Baehr, (front) Sandy Heaton, (back) Mia Meacher, Vicky Zanger, Kim Gilley, Bobbi Mock, Deanna Marshall, Rachel Stuckman, Marikkia Velez, Kathy Bernard



Chicago Home Activities Team: (left to right): Julia Moreno, Ashley DiCristofano, Celene Hernandez.

Veterans

Stay connected!



As we start a new year, stay up to date with news and stories relating to women veterans by visiting the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Center for Women Veterans website at [Center for Women Veterans \(CWV\) \(va.gov\)](https://www.va.gov/cwv) and subscribe to receive

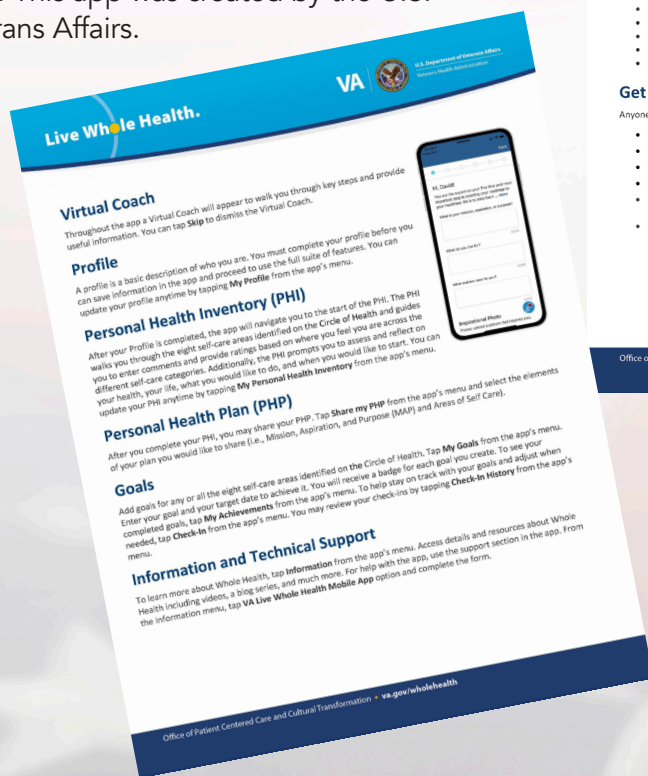
weekly information and updates about women veterans and military women.

Retired Veterans

If you are a military retiree, remember, there may be benefits that are associated to your retired status. One source that can be referenced easily, is Military.com. They have a consolidated benefit resource section that is specific to being a retiree. For more information, visit: [What Benefits Are You Eligible For As A Retiree? | Military.com](https://www.military.com/benefits/retiree) or go to their homepage and select "Retirement" under the "Benefits" tab.

Health and Wellness

Start the new year off with new goals. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs offers great tools to help you set and obtain whole health goals based on your values and needs. Did you know these tools can be found at your fingertips via the VA's Live Whole Health App? Check out the Live Whole Health app available for download on iOS or Android devices in the Apple App or Google Play stores. The Live Whole Health app is not meant to replace professional care for clinical or mental health conditions. This app was created by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.



Live Whole Health. VA U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

What is the Live Whole Health app?

Live Whole Health is a free, easy to use mobile application created for Veterans and others who are ready to take the next step in their Whole Health Journey. Whole Health is VA's holistic approach to care that supports your health and well-being. Whole Health centers care around **what matters to you**, not what is the matter with you.

With the app, you can fill out your personal health inventory, set goals, get virtual coaching, and learn more about Whole Health.

Live Whole Health is available for download on iOS or Android devices in the Apple App or Google Play stores. The Live Whole Health app is not meant to replace professional care for clinical or mental health conditions. This app was created by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Helpful Tips

To get the most out of Live Whole Health, we recommend that you:

- Add action steps after creating goals.
- Use the app's Check-In feature to help you stay on track with your goals.
- Enter comments in 256 characters or less.
- Share your achievements with your care team, peers, friends and family.
- Share your personal health plan with your clinician.
- Check out the wealth of multimedia and digital resources available through the app.

Get Started

Anyone with an Android device, iPhone or iPad can access Live Whole Health by following these steps:

- Go to the **Google Play Store** or **Apple App Store** and search for Live Whole Health.
- Tap the name of the app in the search results.
- On the app's page, tap **Install** (Android) or **Get** (Apple) to download the app.
- From your device's home screen, tap the **app icon** to open the app.
- The first time you open the app, you will be taken to a landing screen with An Overview of the Patient Centered Approach video, Learn How It Works link, and a Create Profile button.
- After you complete your profile, the app opens to a dashboard where you can access all your information as well as the app's full suite of resources and information.

Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation • va.gov/wholehealth

Field Services

A message from Mark Patterson, Field Services Manager

Looking Up

Hopefully we are seeing signs that our world in advocacy is starting to return to “normal”. December numbers are in. Numbers? Yes, numbers. Where would we be without them. I’ll get back to the numbers in a bit.

March 2020, the world changed. Like many industries, advocacy professionals (VSO’s) were trying to figure out how to provide our services to those we have a passion to serve. New conditions caused new methods, new methods caused new training, new training causes less productivity, less productivity causes more training, more training causes efficiency. What is efficiency? I am sure the definition is in a dictionary, but I am more of a practical guy. New conditions and methods require slow and intensive training. You must learn how to do it correctly. Once you learn to do it correctly and continue to train, you have a foundation that allows you to research and learn more. You start doing it correctly faster. Accuracy plus speed equals efficiency. That’s my definition. Keep it simple.

Yep, back to the numbers. December is traditionally a slow month. Colder weather, shopping, travel, family dinners, it takes time and preparation. December of 2019, IDVA VSOs completed 7,487 forms for veterans, dependents, and survivors. December 2020, all the December conditions remained, however, we added fear and concern for others. Things slowed. 2,461 forms were filed, 2021, 4,499 and this December, 4,521. We’re getting there, and yes, things are looking up.

We are hiring and will continue to do so. If you or someone you know has a passion to serve the veteran community, get to illinois.jobs2web.com, start a profile, create alerts for job postings and come join a team of advocacy professionals. We are veterans continuing to serve those that served. Happy New Year.



Walter Wilson, VSO, participates in the Annual Stand Down for Homeless at the Franklin Park Post 974 on January 22, 2023.



Director Prince and Field Services Manager Mark Patterson meets with the Pilsen AJC.

News from the Capitol

The last days of the 102nd General Assembly, known as the lame duck session, took place from January 4th through January 10th. During this time, two substantive bills affecting veterans passed both chambers.

HB 5542—Illinois Joining Forces (IJF) Bill

This is an initiative of Illinois Joining Forces, and it has two main functions. First, it amends the IJF statute so that more members can be added to its Board of Directors. Now, their Board may have up to 18 additional voting members. The Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) or the Director of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) can appoint up to 9 of these members. Second, it allows IJF to receive assistance from IDVA or DMA in regard to adopting rules to govern foundation procedures. It also allows IJF to receive contractual services from either department. This bill is effective on 7/1/23.

HB 2369—VAC Trailer Bill

This is an initiative of several county veterans assistance commissions. (VACs) HB 2369 addresses oversight of VACs. It is a trailer bill to HB 5184, now P.A. 102-0732.

HB 2369 amends the Counties Code and the Military Veterans Assistance Act. It provides specifics for a process where local veteran service organizations can appoint delegates and alternates, with full voting rights, to oversee and vote on undertakings by VACs. It also provides specific information on how the county will be involved, outlining a role for county representatives. It provides that VACs need bylaws, policies and evaluations. It permits the Attorney General to conduct investigations and commence civil actions to enforce the Act. Finally, HB 2369 preempts home rule so that home rule units may not operate, act or fail to act in a manner inconsistent with the Act. This bill will be effective immediately.

These bills are not IDVA initiatives as IDVA did not draft, file, or move them through the legislative process. Any questions should be directed to IJF or the Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions (IACVAC). IDVA, through Veteran Connections, wanted to ensure it reported on these bills as they affect Illinois veterans. Both bills await the Governor's signature.

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://www2.illinois.gov/veterans/Pages/default.aspx>

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/>.



Illinois Department of
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The Chicago Brigade

The Chicago Brigade, founded by student veterans, mission is to establish and maintain unified camaraderie and networking opportunities for the community of student veterans in Chicagoland. Learn more about their work in this article written by Colin Andersen, an undergraduate student at Loyola University Chicago (LUC) majoring in Advertising/Public Relations. He is a United States Army Veteran having served five years as a Human Intelligence Collector and Levantine Arabic linguist. His service was split between working for the 1st Cavalry Division and training with the 504th Expeditionary Military Intelligence Brigade, both located at Fort Hood, Texas. He Chief Operating Officer of the Chicago Brigade which he co-founded with Josh Jones, also a junior at LUC majoring in Economics. Josh served in the Marine Corps as an ammunition technician and served with units including 2nd Battalion 6th Marines.

Why Chicago? Why Veterans? by Colin Andersen

The 'Second City' of Chicago remains a powerful economic hub for all industries, and it boasts a veteran population of around 65,000. The population of veterans in higher education in Chicagoland is somewhere around 3,000-4,500 according to statistics from the VA. Many of these veterans are from diverse neighborhoods, first-generation college students, mothers or fathers, and all of them have years of experience handling adverse situations.

Colleges and universities alike still struggle to understand the positives behind the student veteran and how to handle these students that look and act so different from the rest of the population. But even without full support in some cases, veterans continue to go above and beyond. The New York Times has pointed out that student veterans were "hogging the honor rolls and Dean's lists . . . walking away with the highest marks in all of their courses." The statistics agree, student veterans hold a 3.34 GPA average in comparison to the traditional students 2.94 GPA according to both the U.S. Department of Education and correlated by research done by the Student Veterans of America. Veterans also shine in extracurricular ways, with their call to service making them 43% more likely to engage in community activities focused around giving back.



One of the problems we currently see, even with all these positives, is that employers place their focus on hiring traditional students when visiting colleges. Two-thirds of veterans report that they find themselves underemployed while in college or after finishing their degrees according to research done by Penn State. Many veterans join the service to begin with so that they may later afford college. It is our opinion that those individuals who dedicated years of life to serving this country for that degree deserve a better community while in higher education, and better connection to employers afterwards.

Chicago Brigade is interested in bridging that gap and connecting student veterans with employers specifically looking for them. The interest in hiring veterans and military spouses has been constantly increasing, but we feel that there is currently no good platform within Chicagoland to provide those direct connections. We strive to provide quality networking experiences, equally productive for both employers and students. We, as veterans ourselves, believe in the capabilities that other veterans bring to all industries within the working world. Come join us at one of our events and see if you can find your missing piece.

March 30th Networking Event

Mark your calendars for the Chicago Brigade's first networking event on March 30th, 7-9 PM at the Old Chicago Post Office, 433 West Van Buren in Chicago. The event is designed to establish a community of veterans in higher education within the Chicagoland area while also providing networking opportunities with some of the most sought-after employers. For more information: www.chicagobrigade.org.



Veterans' Homes



The Veterans' Home at Chicago Celebrates its First Anniversary

Congratulations to the Veterans' Home at Chicago for celebrating its first anniversary of becoming a home to Veterans. Led by T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson, Team Chicago is doing an extraordinary job of providing the highest level of care in a warm, compassionate, and fun community. The Veterans enjoyed a program, video, cake, and a parade of decorated and honking cars driven by staff marking this milestone. The Home, located on the northwest side of Chicago is a state-of-the-art Home featuring private rooms, bathroom, and lovely gardens and outdoor spaces.



Above: IVH Manteno member Paul Vrablick gives his seal of approval for a special Wednesday morning breakfast served by volunteers at the facility.



Below: IVH Manteno resident Roger Radnis was one of many members surprised with a Christmas gift given to him by area children.



Knapheide Manufacturing employees brought holiday cheer to veterans at the Illinois Veterans Home in Quincy.



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.



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