

Illinois Veterans Advisory Council

Annual Report 2023



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Letter from the Director



The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) is pleased to present the **Fiscal Year 2023 Illinois Veterans Advisory Council (IVAC) Annual Report**. Ours is a strong and productive partnership – united in advocating for Veterans through legislative initiatives, efficient service delivery systems, and resource sharing. I am proud of what we have accomplished this past year and look forward to our work in the future.

A special THANK YOU to the outgoing IVAC Chair and Vice-Chair, Mike Peck and Dr. Jerry Field, for their two years of leadership. When I came into this position, they provided superb mentorship and guidance which contributed to the Agency's success. Most importantly, their advocacy for Veterans across the state is legendary. We welcome our new Chair and Vice-Chair, Keith Wetherell and Dr. Bob Tyler. Both are Veterans of the United States Marine Corps, and their incredible history of service, in uniform and in Illinois, promises to bring even more opportunities for Veterans and their families.

At IDVA, we worked with the IVAC to develop and achieve the completion of the Agency's Six-Point Plan for the future of IDVA. Now, we are moving on to initiatives in our recently established four-year Strategic Plan. This bold effort capitalizes on the victories (and lessons learned) and promotes an even brighter future for the agency and those we serve. It is broken into three major focus areas:

Priority #1: Our People

Priority #2: Veteran Experience

Priority #3: Operational Excellence

Each of these pillars are supported by strategies for reaching our goals. It's a plan that includes working with our Federal, State, and local partners, especially the IVAC. Our work is ever-changing and together, we can achieve even more for Illinois' treasured Veterans and their families.

I want to personally thank all the volunteer members of the IVAC. We recognize the time and energy you devote to this effort, and we are so proud of the work you have done. Because of you, our robust conversations and legislative efforts have benefited Veterans in many ways. We will continue to nurture and fully engage these efforts to ensure Veterans and their families truly thrive in Illinois.

Sincerely,

Terry Prince,
IDVA Director

Chairman's Report



The Illinois Veterans Advisory Council (IVAC) had a busy and productive Fiscal Year 2023. The IVAC was aptly led by Colonel Mike Peck in the first half of FY2023. During Colonel Peck's tenure, the IVAC championed legislation that cleared up the language and oversight of the Veterans Assistant Commissions. Colonel Peck worked closely with legislators, community leaders, and IDVA staff to improve the lives of Illinois Veterans and their families. His leadership of the IVAC was meaningful, purposeful, and effective - we thank him for all his contributions.

On December 14th, 2022, the IVAC held an election and I was elected for a two-year term as chairman. Colonel Bob Tyler was elected for a two-year term as vice chairman. Under our tenure, we are focusing on specific Veteran-related issues and continues to ardently seek new ways to positively impact Illinois Veterans, their families, and their surrounding communities. For example, the IVAC met in June and thoroughly discussed the many complicated variables and issues associated with Veterans transitioning to civilian life. The IVAC will continue to research and discuss ways to improve this process and many other issues associated with Illinois Veterans.

Looking ahead, we understand there is still much work to be done. In the coming fiscal year, the IVAC will focus on strengthening the implementation of Veteran friendly policies and laws, expanding our outreach efforts, and improving any neglected or nefarious Veteran issues as a whole. We will also continue to monitor emerging issues and adapt our strategies to meet the evolving needs of Illinois Veterans.

We would like to express our gratitude to each council member for their dedication, expertise, and unwavering commitment to serving Veterans. We would also like to thank Director Prince and his staff for their unwavering support. Together we achieved meaningful progress, and our collective efforts will make a lasting impact on Illinois Veterans.

Sincerely,

Keith Wetherell
Chairman
Illinois Veterans Advisory Council

History of the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council

Pursuant to Public Act 100-10, effective June 30, 2017, the State of Illinois created the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council (IVAC). Part of IVAC's mission is to investigate the re-entry process for service members who return to civilian life after being engaged in an active theatre. The investigation shall include the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, homelessness, disabilities, and other issues the council finds relevant to the re-entry process. To accomplish this mission, VAC has convened teams of experienced, professional Veteran advocates, and community leaders to analyze major issue areas and develop strategic policy recommendations. IVAC's strategic policy recommendations are published annually in the IVAC Annual Report. In accordance with the Act, IVAC members include:

- Four members of the General Assembly appointed one each by the President of the Senate, the Minority Leader of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives
- Six Veterans appointed by the Director of Veterans' Affairs
- One Veteran appointed by the commander or president of each Veterans service organization that is chartered by the federal government and by the State of Illinois and elects to appoint a member
- One person appointed by the Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard
- One person appointed by the Illinois Attorney General
- One person appointed by the Illinois Secretary of State
- One person appointed by the Director of the Illinois Department of Employment Security
- One person appointed by each military family organization that is chartered by the federal government

Michael Peck, *Chairman, Military Order of the World Wars*
Dr. Jerry Field, *Vice Chairman, Jewish War Veterans*

GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

The Honorable Sue Rezin, *Illinois State Senator*
The Honorable Tony Munoz, *Illiois State Senator*
The Honorable Dan Swanson, *Illinois State Representative*
The Honorable Lance Yednock, *Illinois State Representative*

EXTERNAL AGENCY APPOINTEES

Major General Richard Neely, *Illinois National Guard*
Shannon Yount, *Office of the Attorney General*
Nathan Maddox, *Office of the Secretary of State*
Jorge Eric Bermudez, *Illinois Department of Employment Security*

DIRECTOR'S APPOINTEES

Bill Wolff, *Veteran Advocate*
Renysa Brown, *Veteran Advocate*
Kevin Wathen, *Veteran Advocate*
Megan Everett, *Veteran Advocate*
Frank Gutierrez, *Veteran Advocate*
Vince Long, *Veteran Advocate*

VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Al Reynolds, *Disabled American Veterans*
Stanley Olenjack, *Marine Corps League*
Keith Wetherell, *AMVETS*
Peggy Arick, *Blue Star Mothers of America*
Tim Kennedy, *Catholic War Veterans*
Joe Schaler, *Military Order of the Purple Heart*
John Murray, *Veterans Assistance Commission*
Justin Miller, *Veterans of Foreign Wars*
Roy L. Dolgos, *Vietnam Veterans of America*
Bob Tyler, *Military Officers Association of America*
Lou Myers, *Reserve Organization of America*
Myron Kirby, *The American Legion*



The Illinois General Assembly was in session from January to early May of this year. Several key pieces of legislation were signed into law or sent to the Governor. Here is a brief synopsis of some of these bills:

HB2507 which provides that property that is used as a qualified residence by a Veteran who was a member of the United States Armed Forces during World War II is exempt from taxation regardless of the Veteran's level of disability. This bill also clarifies the language to allow certified disabled Veterans with a general under honorable conditions to continue to qualify for the Homestead Exemption, and provides that for taxable year 2024 and thereafter, for Veterans that are rated 70% or higher, the first \$250,000 in equalized assessed value of the property is exempt from taxation. This bill has passed both houses and is awaiting the Governor's signature.

SB1376 Amends the Homeless Family Placement Act. In a provision listing certain factors a referring agency must consider prior to referring a homeless family with school age children to a shelter, requires the referring agency to also consider the military status of any member of the family to determine the family's eligibility for state or federal benefits and other supportive services for homeless Veterans and their families, including, but not limited to, housing or rental assistance, job training, and employment opportunities.

HB2856 Provides that the death certificate for an individual with a history of military service may include or may be amended to include the branch of the military that the deceased individual served in, the period of time that he or she served in the military, and whether a military service-related injury contributed to the cause of death (rather than may include or may be amended to include the deceased individual's Veteran status, the branch of the military that he or she served in, and the period of time that he or she served in the military). This bill passed both chambers and has been sent to the Governor.



According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there are nearly two million women Veterans living in the United States today. Women Veterans are the fastest growing demographic in the Veteran community. In 2000, four percent of the Veteran population were women. By 2040, the Veteran population is projected to be close to 18 percent women. Of the two million women Veterans across America, Illinois is proud to recognize the estimated 49,000 women Veterans who call Illinois home.

In August of 2015, Illinois passed legislation creating the position of Women Veterans Program Coordinator within the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs. They will serve as an advocate for women Veterans in recognition of the unique issues they face. Through community engagement, the IDVA Women Veterans Program Coordinator partners with local, state, national, and federal organizations to establish a full-bodied outreach program to address the needs of women Veterans and develop networks for support.

During state fiscal year 2022, the Women Veteran Program participated in eight events for Veterans. For state fiscal year 2023, seven events were held, and all were in-person. Over the next fiscal year, the Women Veterans Program Coordinator plans to continue the growth and collaboration throughout the state in support of the growing demographic of Veterans and their unique needs.

The IDVA Women Veterans Program appreciates the support of the IVAC and hearing directly from the various Veteran service organizations throughout the state on the needs of women Veterans in their communities.

Illinois Veteran Homelessness

There are over 700 homeless Veterans on Illinois' streets every day. Moreover, almost seven percent of Illinois' Veterans live in poverty. As a result, these poverty-stricken Veterans often experience substance use disorders, behavioral health problems, and a general lack of support for their unique circumstances. Many Veterans struggling economically could have better outcomes by receiving assistance before becoming homeless. Unfortunately, once their situation becomes dire, it is often challenging for them to overcome these obstacles, and these struggling Veterans often find themselves in a perpetual fight for survival. Our besieged Veterans deserve better.

At the Federal level, Veteran's Administration's (VA) HUD VASH Program, which subsidizes housing for Veterans, is one major program which has been successful. An additional VA program that is used, is the VA's Supportive Services Veterans Families (SSVF) which also assists Veterans in obtaining stable housing.



Prioritizing services, such as job retention, job placement, substance use disorder counseling, behavioral health services, support groups, proper housing, rent and mortgage programs, and transition services is imperative. Focusing on prevention is priority for the IVAC. The following are key areas of focus:

- Prevention - Establish a fund that can be used for rent, utilities, and food assistance
- Outreach and Assessment - funding for stand downs and change and recovery programs
- Emergency Shelter - provide personal care items, food, and clothing
- Transitional Housing - provide a network of services that promote like skills and reintegration
- Supportive Permanent Housing - a program based around case management and oversight
- Affordable Housing - provide moving assistance, childcare, and services that offset the housing expenses

Illinois Veterans Re-entry and Employment



Currently, the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) in partnership with the state Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) agencies, participates in the U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) grant funded Transition Assistance Program workshops at both Naval Training Center Great Lakes, and Scott Air Force Base. Jobs for Veterans, state grant staff, employment services, and WIOA partners give an overview on the services provided at their American Job Centers, encouraging Veterans to stop by or to connect to them at one of their relocation sites.

IDES partners with the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) grantees - primarily in Illinois, but also in several bordering metro areas like St. Louis, MO, and Davenport, IA. HVRP is an employment focused competitive grant program of the U.S. Department of Labor - Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) and is the only federal grant to focus exclusively on competitive employment for homeless Veterans. Through the collaboration of IDES and the American Job Centers, we provide a wide range of employment and training services to assist our Veterans in entering the civilian workforce while earning meaningful and family sustaining wages.

Partnerships with various Veterans Service Organizations like our County Veterans' Assistance Commissions provide Veterans with VA Benefits, financial, rental, and utility assistance. IDES, and the Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) have specialists who assist with mitigating significant barriers to employment of our Veterans most in need.

IDES created the DES.MyVetRep@illinois.gov email address which is located on the IDVA and IDES websites. Military service members, Veterans, or spouses can send an email related to employment or employment assistance to this address and receive a response. Employers can use this email address as well when seeking to employ Veterans.

IDES conducts outreach within both business and supportive service communities to advocate on behalf of our servicemembers, Veterans, and spouses. Additionally, IDES conducts in-reach at thirteen Illinois Department of Correction Centers throughout Illinois to incarcerated Veterans.

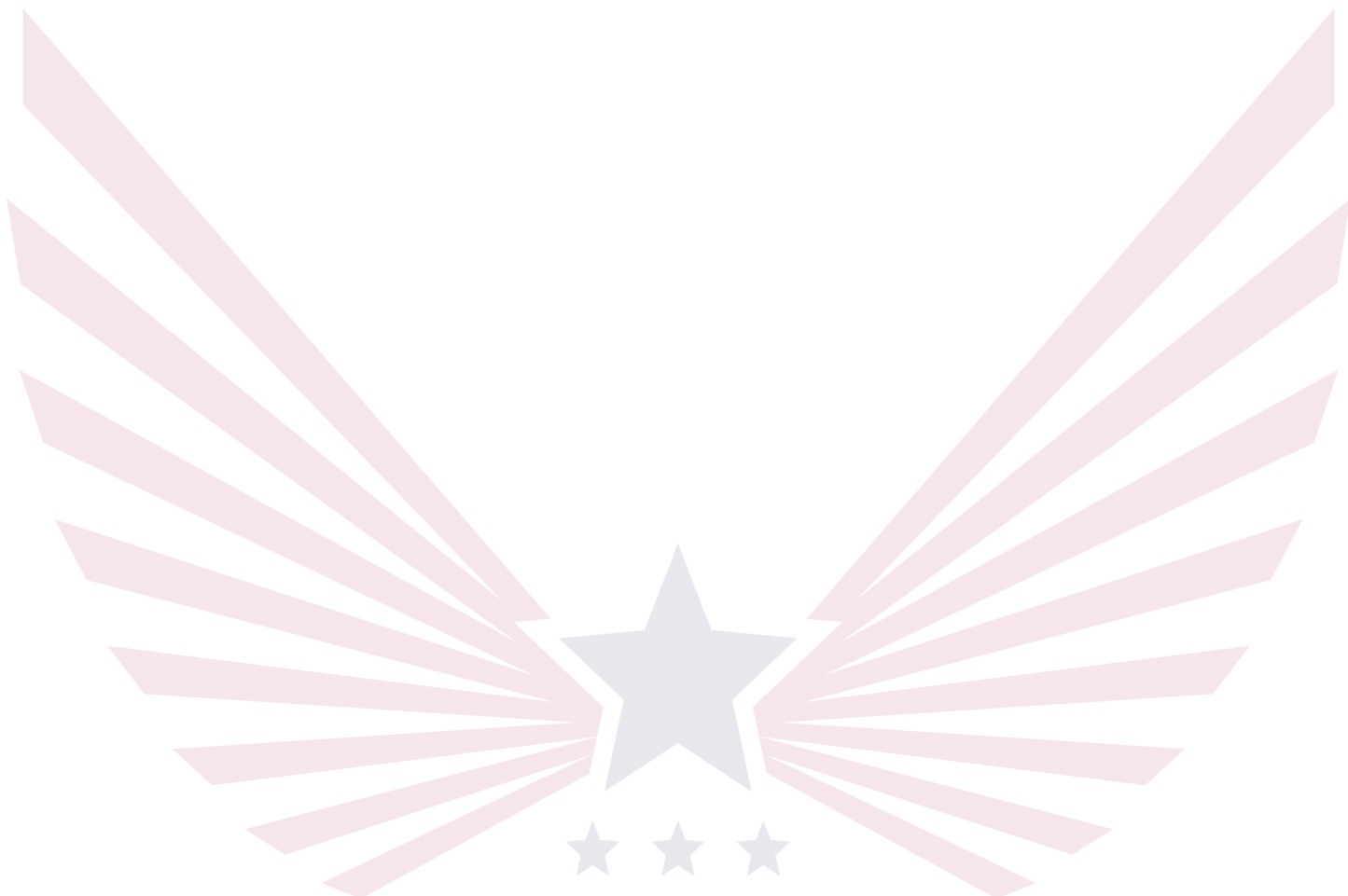
IDES and WIOA partners are available to assist service members, Veterans, and spouses at any career transition point to include connections to many federal, state, county, and local services as well as Veteran Service Organizations. IDES is working with local unions on apprenticeship programs, such as Chicago-HIRE 360 and Utility Workers Military Assistance Program (UMAP) - Chicago.

All new job orders posted on IllinoisJobLink.com (IJL) have a 48-hour Veteran priority for employment referral. IJL provides matches to employers with Veterans for the first 24 hours after an order is posted. Other covered persons (spouses) are included in the list for the next 24 hours.

Illinois Veterans Re-entry and Employment

IVAC recommends the following:

- 1) IVAC urges IDVA to request a list of those transitioning service members indicating their intent to return to Illinois from DOD. This would allow the IDVA and the WIOA partners (IDES, DCEO, DHS, and Illinois Community College Board) an opportunity to connect to the transitioning service members early to initiate both VA Benefits and Employment Assistance.
- 2) IVAC urges the Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Labor (DOL) to permit establishing an American Job Center on Great Lakes Naval Base, Scott Air Force Base, and Camp Lincoln in Springfield. Please note, Joint Base Lewis-McChord (WA) has an American Job Center and is doing very well serving transitioning service members and spouses.
- 3) Active-duty service members are encouraged to participate in the DOD SkillBridge program as an opportunity for service members to gain valuable civilian work experience through specific industry training, or apprenticeships during the last 180 days of service. SkillBridge connects service members with industry partners in real-world job experiences.



Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program

The Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program (IVTP) assesses the strengths and needs of Veteran offenders within 18 months of release. IDES Veteran Representatives go to facilities to complete assessments. Additionally, IDVA visits the facilities to bring Veterans up to date on their benefits and to assist them with their verification of service. The verification of services is essential to these individuals in obtaining various needs such as short-term housing, special employment programs and health services. Once the assessments have been completed, the IDES representatives hold group classes to educate incarcerated Veterans on how to obtain benefits and find steady employment.

The program is currently offered at 14 of our facilities: Big Muddy River, Centralia, Danville, Decatur, Dixon, East Moline, Lincoln, Pinckneyville, Robinson, Shawnee, Southwestern, Taylorville, Vandalia, and Vienna. IDES Veteran Representatives present workshops geared to training in how to:

- Write a resume
- Interview
- Overcome the felony conviction
- Dress for success
- Obtain VA benefits
- Apply for a job
- Keep a job
- Housing needs (critical needs only)
- Locating IDES Veteran Representative

Partnerships with agencies include: The State of Illinois Appellate Defender's Office, the Small Business Association, and the Veterans Outreach Program. Some of the information and services provided include:

- Expungement of records, sealing of records, pardons, and Certificate of Relief of Disability Information
- Fidelity Bonding, Federal Bonding, Work Opportunity Tax Credit and Veteran Services available at the IDES Offices
- Federal & State services/benefits to which they are entitled

Conclusion

The Illinois Veterans Advisory Council's annual report serves as a testament to the unwavering commitment and dedication of all those involved in supporting and advocating for our state's Veterans. Throughout the past fiscal year, the council has made significant strides in addressing the unique challenges faced by Veterans and their families, while also working towards enhancing their overall well-being.

The report highlights the IVAC's multifaceted approach, combining legislative advocacy, community engagement, and collaborative efforts with various stakeholders. By fostering partnerships with legislators, state agencies, Veterans service organizations, and private companies, the IVAC has been able to create comprehensive programs and initiatives that cater to the diverse needs of Illinois Veterans. The IVAC will continue to ensure Illinois Veterans' needs are being met and to ensure their service and sacrifices continue to be appreciated and recognized.

The IVAC met quarterly on:

September 14th, 2022

December 14th, 2022

March 8th, 2023

June 21st, 2023

To access the minutes for each meeting, please visit <https://veterans.illinois.gov/about-us/illinois-veterans-advisory-council.html> You can access all IVAC meeting dates, agendas, minutes, and annual reports.

Special thanks to the IDVA staff, Director Prince, Senators Rezin and Munoz, Representatives Kifowit, Swanson, and Yednock, the council members, Veteran Service Organizations, and all the other supporters who steadfastly remain dedicated to supporting our Veterans in every possible way.

For more information about the Department's programs and services, please contact:

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