

VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs ★ Volume 3, Issue 6 ★ September 2023



★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

IDVA Veteran Service Officers (VSO) were deployed across the state this month participating in community events and programs. The intent was to reach as many veterans as possible about how IDVA can help veterans obtain their earned benefits. When we are talking to veterans, we often hear confusion between the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA). The greatest misconception is centered around the VA Health System, which includes Jesse Brown, Illiana, Edward Hines, Marion, Captain James A Lovell Health Care Centers, and many outpatient clinics around the state. USDVA operates

these locations, not IDVA. However, IDVA VSOs are extremely knowledgeable about each location and can connect you to the right people to get you the care you need. Here are a few things to know about IDVA:

- IDVA is your vehicle for information and assistance on obtaining federal and state benefits and services that apply to each veteran. With VSOs located in offices across the state, IDVA works with each veteran to discuss personal, family, and health circumstances to identify which services and benefits will work for you.
- IDVA helps you navigate both systems, so the process is less cumbersome, and you don't miss out on opportunities that are available to you.
- IDVA also offers five Veterans' homes across the state for those seeking skilled nursing home care. These locations are Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy.

You can learn more about IDVA on our website: <https://veterans.illinois.gov/>

Even though Suicide Prevention Awareness Month is ending, the team at IDVA will continue its efforts to end veteran suicide. Last week, I participated in a ceremony at the Forgotten Warriors Memorial in Channahon State Park honoring four veterans who lost their battle with PTSD. It hurts my soul, hearing the names of four veterans who had lost hope and seeing the families and friends they left behind. Suicide is preventable, and we all have a role in supporting this fight. Look out for yourselves and veterans in your family and community and if a crisis arises, there is help. The Veterans Crisis Line is available 24/7.



September 15th – October 15th is Hispanic Heritage Month. The theme, "Latinos: Driving Prosperity, Power, and Progress in America," reflects the contributions of Latino veterans through military service and beyond. We are privileged to care for Latino veterans in our homes and to provide service to Latino veterans throughout Illinois. We are also grateful to work side by side with Latino veterans whose contributions are immense. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there are nearly 1.3 million Latino veterans, or about eight percent of the veteran population. By 2045, this figure is projected to reach 12 percent. Let's celebrate their tremendous contributions and continue to stand by this growing community.

In this edition of Veterans Connections, you will also learn about important benefit information, IDVA events and general updates. If you have questions, please reach out to IDVA.MEDIA@illinois.gov.

As always, thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

Sincerely, **Terry Prince**, IDVA Director

The Next PACT Act Deadline



Health Care Enrollment for Illinois Veterans who deployed to Combat Zones

This press release was issued on September 5th by the Marion VA Health Care System. It is published with permission.

Until 11:59pm local time on September 30, 2023, Veterans who deployed to a combat zone, never enrolled in VA health care, and left active duty between September 11, 2001, and October 1, 2013, are eligible to enroll directly in VA health care. This special enrollment period gives Veterans who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other combat zones, an opportunity to enroll directly in VA health care without first applying for VA benefits.

VA encourages all eligible Illinois Veterans to visit [VA.gov/PACT](https://www.va.gov/PACT) or call 1-800-MYVA411 to learn more and sign up for VA health care before the deadline. Veterans who are enrolled in VA health care are proven to have better health outcomes than non-enrolled Veterans, and VA hospitals have dramatically outperformed non-VA hospitals in [overall quality ratings](#) and [patient satisfaction ratings](#). Additionally, VA health care is often [more affordable](#) than non-VA health care for Veterans.

This special enrollment period is a part of the PACT Act, the largest expansion of VA health care and benefits in generations. Since President Biden signed the PACT Act into law on August 10, 2022, more than 344,000 Veterans have enrolled in VA health care and more than 4.2 million enrolled Veterans have been screened for toxic exposures. In Illinois alone, more than 373,400 Veterans have received PACT Act benefits and more than 224,300 Veterans have enrolled in VA care.

“Are you a Veteran who deployed to a combat zone but never enrolled in VA health care? If you left active duty between September 11, 2001, and October 1, 2013, you should sign up now,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “Even if you don’t need this care now, you may need it in the future – and once you’re in, you have access for life. But don’t wait – the deadline is September 30 – so go to [VA.gov/PACT](https://www.va.gov/PACT) and apply today.”

Although this deadline is written into law for this specific group of Veterans, many other groups of Veterans are able to enroll directly in VA health care without first applying for VA benefits – including many Vietnam Veterans, Gulf War Veterans, Veterans who deployed to a combat zone and transitioned out of the service

less than 10 years ago, and [more](#). Veterans who do not meet any of the above criteria can often still access VA health care by filing for VA benefits. If a Veteran is granted service-connected disability for a health condition because of military service, they may also be eligible for VA care.

The PACT Act also expanded VA benefits for millions of Veterans, making more than 300 health conditions “presumptive” for service connection. This means that if an [eligible](#) Veteran has one of these health conditions, VA automatically assumes that the condition was caused by the Veteran’s service and provides compensation and care accordingly. Since the PACT Act was signed into law, VA has delivered more than \$1.85 billion in PACT Act benefits to Veterans and their survivors. VA encourages Veterans and their survivors to apply for these benefits now at [VA.gov/PACT](https://www.va.gov/PACT).

VA is currently in a full-court press to ensure that as many Veterans as possible enroll before September 30. To date, VA’s PACT Act outreach campaign has included more than 2,000 events nationwide, \$13 million in paid media, 60,000 earned media clips, more than 400 million emails and letters to Veterans, the creation of a [one-stop-shop PACT Act website](#), and more. This is the largest outreach campaign in VA history, which has one goal in mind: ensure that all Veterans – and their survivors – get the health care and benefits they deserve under the PACT Act.

More information on eligibility for the special enrollment period can be found at [VA.gov/PACT](https://www.va.gov/PACT). The period applies to Veterans who deployed to a combat zone, never enrolled in VA health care, and left active duty between September 11, 2001, and October 1, 2013 – specifically those who served in a theater of combat operations during a period of war after the Persian Gulf War or in combat against a hostile force during a period of hostilities after November 11, 1998.

For more information about how the PACT Act is helping Veterans and their survivors, visit VA’s [PACT Act Dashboard](#). To apply for care or benefits today, visit [VA.gov/PACT](https://www.va.gov/PACT) or call 1-800-MYVA411.

Under the new 2022 PACT Act



you may be eligible for enhanced
or new health care benefits



ARE YOU A COMBAT VETERAN?

Learn more at [VA.gov](https://www.va.gov)
1-800-MyVA411 (800-698-2411)



Camp Lejeune Justice Act

Process put in place to expedite claims

In 2022, the Camp Lejeune Justice Act was passed allowing veterans and family members that were exposed to the drinking water at Camp Lejeune to sue for damages for harm caused by chemicals in the water. As a result of this law, thousands of benefit claims were filed creating a flood and backlog of legal cases in the federal system.

To address the backlog of Camp Lejeune claims, the VA has introduced this settlement option (called the "Elective Option") designed to expedite the compensation process. This allows eligible claimants to receive a predetermined payout without the necessity of the normal legal trial process. The Elective Option is available to certain claimants with qualifying injuries and who resided or worked at Camp Lejeune for at least 30 days on the Camp Lejeune base from Aug. 1, 1953, to Dec. 31, 1987

The Elective Option is essentially an administrative process established to streamline compensation for veterans who were exposed to contaminated water at Camp Lejeune and subsequently developed specific illnesses. This process operates outside the traditional lawsuit and allows a more direct route to compensation for qualifying veterans .

For additional information and a list of frequently asked questions, please visit this link:

[Camp Lejeune Justice Act Claims \(navy.mil\)](https://www.navy.mil/camp-lejeune-justice-act-claims)

To reach an IDVA Veteran Service Officer to help you with your claim, please visit: <https://veterans.illinois.gov/serviceoffices.html>

Field Services



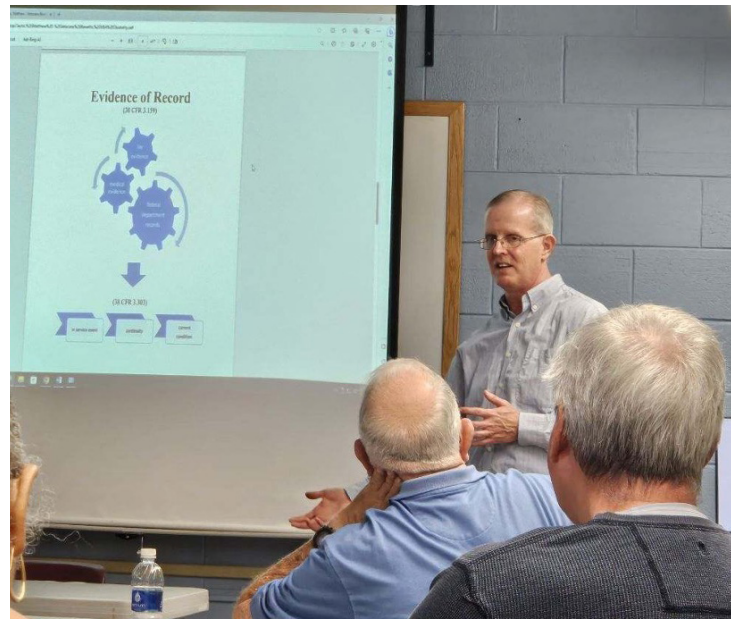
We are proud of our own Anthony Hernandez, recognized by the town of Lockport as one of its heroes. Anthony is certainly one of our heroes as a dedicated Veteran Service Officer and IDVA's 2022 Employee of the Year.



Chicago Veteran Service Officer Michele Richards attends Maine Township's Garage Sale community event on September 9th.



Veteran Service Officers Shynae Murphy and Malon Norfleet participate in the Schaumburg Sport Center Senior Expo on September 12.



IDVA Veteran Service Officer Matt Taylor taught a class about VA Benefits at Rock Valley College (RCV) on Wednesday, September 13th. Matt discussed VA Health Care and the VA Benefits Administration Program. His goal was to provide solid, objective resources for applications and resources. The class received a positive response from participants and plans are being made for future classes.

Quincy Resident Inducted into Quincy University Hall of Fame

Illinois Veterans' Home at Quincy resident Bill Starkey was inducted into the Quincy University Hall of Fame for Professional Achievement. "Coach" Starkey was recognized for his extensive career where he led Quincy Notre Dame High School to five state championships, two in volleyball (1978 and 1980) and three in softball (1981, 1982, and 1984). He taught History and Social Studies at the school for 40 years. He attended Quincy College (now Quincy University) and earned his Bachelor of Arts in History. Coach Starkey served in the U.S. Army for two years during the Vietnam War. Bill joined the Quincy community on April 5th, 2023. Coaches and players from Quincy Notre Dame and Quincy University visit him often. His mother is a former resident of the Quincy home whom Coach Starkey visited often.



Coach Starkey's former players came out to honor their coach. Pictured from left to right: Lori Vogel, Amy Looten, Tracy Orne, & Caren Kemner (three-time Olympian, former American volleyball player, and a member of the 1980 Quincy Notre Dame championship team).

Veterans Garage and Project Head Space and Timing Put on a Show for The Veterans' Home at Manteno



Tom Asay of Project Headspace and Timing mans the grill.

The Veterans Garage and Project Head Space and Timing (PHAT) delighted the residents of the Veterans' Home at Manteno with a cookout and fishing tournament at the home's scenic Lile Lake. The Veterans Garage restores, preserves, maintains, and displays historic military vehicles and equipment. Their intent is

to honor veterans by displaying their vehicles at events centered around veterans. It is also a working garage and restoration facility made available for owners to work on their military vehicles. More information can be found on their website: www.veteransgarage.com

Project Headspace and Timing promotes positive mental health practices for our nation's veterans by working to unify them with their communities, nature, and themselves. More information can be found on its website: www.projectheadspaceandtiming.org

"Our veterans spent the afternoon enjoying great food, fishing, and reminiscing about their experience with these historic military vehicles because of the generosity of The Veterans Garage and Project Head Space and Timing," said Tanya Huston, Veterans' Home at Manteno Administrator. "We are grateful to our community partners and volunteers for brightening the days of our residents."



Transitioning from Service

Managing stress

Maintaining relationships

Visit [VA.gov/REACH](https://va.gov/REACH) for resources on life transitions and adjusting to civilian life.

Don't wait. Reach out.

Team IDVA News

Eric Schmidt joins the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs as Homes Construction Coordinator to oversee construction projects at the Agency's five veterans' homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy. He comes to IDVA from the Illinois Department of Public Health and the Department on Aging where he managed special projects from inception to completion. His experience includes preparing requests for proposals, bids, and requests for Information, evaluating proposals, negotiating vendor contracts, analyzing internal vouchers, reviewing grants, and coordinating reports. He is a veteran of the United States Army having served six years as a team leader and scheduling labor, materials, and contractor coordination. He earned his Bachelor of Science and Master of Science in Accountancy degrees from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.



NATIONAL
HISPANIC
HERITAGE
MONTH



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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