



VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 6, Issue 6 ★ June 2026



Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

We are celebrating the 250th birthday of the United States of America! John Hancock was the first to sign the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, and 55 more signatures followed. Our nation's rich history is built on this unshakeable document the founding fathers designed for future generations. It's an exciting milestone as communities will gather across the nation to celebrate our freedoms and the diverse cultures that define us. Fireworks will light up the sky, community parades will be held, and the stars and stripes of America's flag will cover the nation.

IDVA is especially proud to honor this milestone and the military men and women who served so bravely to bring the Declaration of Independence to life. Without their courage, it was simply words, a vision, and a hope. For more than 250 years, men and women have come forward to serve and protect our freedoms stateside and to support nations around the globe. On July 4th, we will burst with pride for a nation that is held up by the sacrifices of men and women who selflessly chose their branch, their uniform, and how they would serve. They didn't know where or what was ahead, but they stood tall, prepared to serve.

This is why caring for veterans in our five Veterans' Homes is so meaningful to us. They are men and women who followed in the footsteps of others who came before them. Their patriotism is abundant, and we care for them with dignity and respect. We also walk arm in arm with the men and women transitioning from military service to obtain their earned benefits and services, so they can truly thrive in Illinois!

Happy July 4th.

Thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

Sincerely,

Terry Prince, Director and U.S. Navy Veteran



Director Prince's photo joins the wall at Mission Barbeque in Springfield.

"Not only is Mission Barbeque one of my favorite places to visit," said Director Prince. "They have been a strong and consistent partner in supporting Illinois veterans."

State Approving Agency/Veterans Education and Training

IDVA's State Approving Agency and Veterans Education and Training (SAA/VETS) teams met in Springfield for a two-day meeting to discuss ongoing projects, internal processes, and to re-evaluate education facilities. The team is also preparing for the sunset of Chapter 35 GI Bill ® benefits for dependent spouses and children (see article below). The SAA is a federally funded program that approves and audits college and non-college degree programs, flight training, apprenticeships, on-the-job (OJT) training programs, license and certification programs, exam prep, and entrepreneurship programs. Last year alone, the SAA's efforts resulted in Illinois leading the nation in active apprenticeship and OJT programs.

- **1,306** approved education and training programs
- **181** universities, colleges, and community colleges
- **117** vocational schools
- **376** high schools
- **567** approved apprenticeships and on-the-job training programs for veterans, service members, and families.

If you are interested in learning more about earned educational benefits, [visit here](#).



left to right: Tracy Kimmel - Scholarships Coordinator, Janine Arriola - Veterans Educational Specialist, Enrique Cabrera - Veterans Educational Specialist, Jeff Lewis - Administrator, Andrew Pieper - Veterans Educational Specialist, Jayson Hoffman - Veterans Educational Specialist, and Tiffany Perry - Veterans Educational Specialist.

Education and Training

VA is Discontinuing Chapter 35 Benefits for High School Programs

On Aug. 1, 2026, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will [discontinue Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance \(DEA or Chapter 35\)](#) benefits for high school programs.

[Public Law 117-328](#) statutorily changed the definition of "educational institution" by deleting "secondary school" and replacing it with "post-secondary school." This means that using DEA benefits for secondary education, such as high school coursework, GED level training, tutoring, or academic remediation, **is no longer allowed for any program starting on or after Aug. 1, 2026.**

What does this mean for the school and students?

The VA will pay DEA benefits only for academic terms that start before Aug. 1, 2026. However, DEA benefits will continue only through the end of the academic term that began before Aug. 1, 2026 (term lengths may vary by school). The VA cannot continue DEA benefits for subsequent academic terms even if required for graduation.

What action is VA taking?

In the coming months, the VA will provide written guidance and host training for impacted schools to inform and assist them with preparing for and implementing the change. The VA is contacting all identified beneficiaries to make them aware of this change.

What if students have questions about their benefits?

We are committed to providing regular updates about these changes and how VA is implementing them through [email](#) and our [Post 9/11 GI Bill Facebook page](#). Beneficiaries with questions about their benefits may submit inquiries through [Ask VA](#). To use Ask VA, [beneficiaries must have an authenticated VA account](#).

News from the Capitol: Spring Session

Three legislative initiatives benefiting Illinois veterans are awaiting Governor Pritzker's signature. IDVA's legislative team monitors and reports on legislation impacting veterans and their families.

SB3926, effective immediately, continues and improves the Breakthrough Therapies for the Veteran Suicide Prevention Program Advisory Council. The Council advises the Illinois Department of Public Health on the rules and infrastructure to support clinical access to and training for medication-assisted United States Food and Drug Administration breakthrough therapies for veteran suicide prevention.

HB4385, effective July 1, 2027, provides that a person eligible to receive certain military specialty plates is entitled to receive a second set of the special plates under the same terms and conditions as the first set of special plates.

SB2713, effective January 1, 2027, provides that no management of a health care provider may discourage a health care worker from exercising their right to contact law enforcement or file a report with law enforcement or the Department of Public Health (rather than only to contact law enforcement), because of workplace violence. It prohibits a health care provider from maintaining a policy that limits the type of workplace violence about which a health care worker may contact law enforcement or file a report with law enforcement or the Department.



Women Veterans Program

IDVA's Women Veterans Program is continuously growing and exploring elevated ways to serve women veterans and provide them with support and resources. IDVA is excited to share the expanded Women Veterans Program webpage with access to event calendars and a library of the 25 Women Veteran Leaders in 2025 and 2026, and other helpful links to resources. [Take a look.](#)

25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders in 2026



Dr. Nikelcia Marcelin, Army

Retired Staff Sergeant Nikelcia Marcelin is a United States Army Veteran who served during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and the Korean War era (2002–2013) as a High-Level Security Clearance Logistical Transportation Supervisor. She specialized in Mobility Air Load Planning and Strategic Military Operational Movement. Injured while on active duty, she became a service-connected Veteran during her tenure. However, Ms. Marcelin did not allow her injury to hinder her passion for service—she transformed her experience into advocacy, leadership, and community impact.

Nikelcia currently serves on the Veteran Affairs Mental Health Advocacy Council and with American Legion Post #740 as Youth Advisory Council and Post Publicist Officer. She works with veterans at all levels of training and certification and has developed strategies to improve military-to-civilian transition outcomes.

As a Veteran Business Owner and national strategist, she has implemented innovative systems that create economic mobility and workforce pipelines for veterans and underserved communities. She is the author of the self-published book 'Are Veterans Transitioning Effectively In American Society.'

Nikelcia assisted in launching Chicago Sports Construction, a workforce-focused enterprise dedicated to infrastructure development in the sports construction industry. Through this initiative, she helped establish a trade vocational training program in Chicago designed to create direct career pathways in sports construction.

Her military performance has been featured on major television stations both abroad and in the United States, and she has received numerous military honors for excellence in service.

Nikelcia has completed over 10,000 hours of community service and received the prestigious Presidential Volunteer Service Award signed by the President of the United States. She has been coached and mentored for leadership roles at the White House level and continues to serve on several nonprofit boards as an Advisory Board Member and Strategic Planner for long-term organizational stability.

A transformational leader, coach, educator, and mentor, Nikelcia continues to build scalable systems that create opportunity, restore dignity and strengthen communities. Her work bridges military precision, workforce development innovation, and community revitalization—leaving a lasting imprint on future generations.

25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders in 2026



Nicole Mandeville, Army

Nicole Mandeville is a proud United States Army veteran and executive public servant whose leadership reflects discipline, integrity, and steady resolve. She serves as Deputy Chief Procurement Officer for Business Enterprise Development within the Office of the Chief Procurement Officer for Cook County, Illinois, where she advances equitable access to government contracting opportunities and strengthens systems that drive economic impact.

Formed by her military service, Nicole brings mission clarity, accountability, and principled decision-making to programs supporting small businesses, minority- and women-owned firms, veteran-owned businesses, and businesses owned by individuals with disabilities. She is recognized for modernizing procurement frameworks, reinforcing compliance and transparency, and ensuring that public investment expands opportunity across communities.

Nicole views leadership as both responsibility and refinement. Her professional journey reflects disciplined growth, thoughtful preparation and the courage to evolve. She holds high standards, leads with measured confidence, and builds structures designed to endure beyond her tenure—understanding that true impact is sustained through consistency and conviction. She remains committed to ensuring women veterans and public servants are seen, prepared, and positioned to lead.



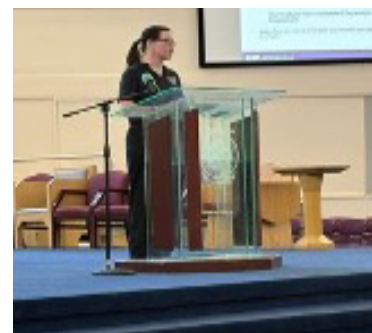
Blue Star Families were offered a preview of the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago before its official opening on Juneteenth. Participants explored the center's exhibits and learned about its mission to inspire leadership, civic engagement, and community involvement. Margo Watson, IDVA Women Veterans Coordinator, participated in the preview event.

Field Services

The Illinois and Indiana Departments of Veterans Affairs, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Department of Labor partnered to educate Sailors transitioning from the Navy about state benefits at the Recruit Training Command, Great Lakes Naval Station. IDVA Veteran Service Officer and U.S. Navy Veteran Carla Waibel presented to the 30 future veterans. The full-day program included a tour of the bootcamp and lunch with the recruits.

"By partnering with the Indiana Department of Veterans Affairs, we were able to offer Naval personnel comprehensive information on benefits in the neighboring states," said Carla Waibel. "The tour of the bootcamp brought back memories, and it has changed dramatically since I participated years ago."

Carla served as a U.S. Navy Dental Technician from 1995-2000 in Okinawa, Japan, at Camp Futenma, and later, the Naval Hospital at Great Lakes. She has helped thousands of her fellow veterans since joining IDVA in 2016 and currently serves in the Rock Island area.



Carla Waibel, Illinois Veteran Service Officer.

IDVA Team Participates in Chicagoland Veteran Standdown

Team members from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA), including Veteran Service Officers (VSOs), Education Services, Human Resources Recruitment, and the Women Veterans Program, participated in the Chicagoland Veteran Standdown held at the National Guard Armory in Chicago.

The event brought together service providers, community organizations, and government agencies to connect veterans with essential resources, support services, and benefits. A total of 243 veterans were served by more than 70 vendors, who offered a wide range of assistance, including healthcare services, benefits information, employment opportunities, housing resources, and supportive programs. Additional services provided during the event included 85 haircuts and 150 eye examinations conducted by Pearl Vision. The Standdown was made possible by 151 volunteers who collectively contributed 792 volunteer hours.

IDVA staff were proud to engage directly with veterans, provide information about available programs and benefits, and strengthen connections within the veteran community. Events such as the Chicagoland Veteran Standdown play a vital role in ensuring that veterans have access to the resources and support they have earned through their service.



left to right: Enrique Cabrera, Veteran Educational Specialist; Margo Watson, Women Veterans Coordinator; Candice Rudd, HR & Recruitment Specialist; Tiffany Perry, Veteran Educational Specialist; Andrew Pieper, Veteran Educational Specialist; Michelle Richards, Veteran Service Officer; and Malon Norfleet, Veteran Service Officer

This article was submitted by Honor Flight Chicago and was published with permission.

Honor Flight Chicago

Honor Flight Chicago recognizes the service and sacrifice of America's senior veterans and builds awareness and appreciation of the gratitude this country owes these men and women. They honor veterans from World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War with an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C., to visit the memorials built in tribute to their service, surrounded by more than a hundred fellow service members and a battalion of grateful, patriotic volunteers.

We Thank Veterans for their service and sacrifice and encourage communities to show their own gratitude and respect throughout the year. For all our Veterans, but especially our Vietnam Veterans, we stage the Welcome Home of a Lifetime that has been more than half a century overdue.

We inspire future generations about the power of gratitude and respect for service and service members, connecting our mission with students to ensure that what happened to our Vietnam Veterans never happens again.

Eligibility: Any Veteran who served on active duty from December 7, 1941, through May 15, 1975, is eligible for an Honor Flight! It does not matter where or in what role a Veteran served. What is important is that they served during a time of war and are deserving of our gratitude. Veterans who served during WWII or the Korean War (defined as December 7, 1941, through January 31, 1955) go right to the head of the line. Veterans who served during the Vietnam War (defined as November 1, 1955, through May 15, 1975) fly in the order in which we receive their application, so don't delay and get your application in today!

The Honor Flight: Honor Flight Chicago provides a one-day trip on a chartered Southwest Airlines jet from Midway Airport to our nation's capital. Everything needed for the day is provided free of charge for the Veteran, including all meals and wheelchair assistance, if necessary. In D.C., we tour the nation's War Memorials on chartered luxury coach buses with special events and so much gratitude all along the way. The tour concludes back at Midway with the Welcome Home of a Lifetime.

"Honor Flight Chicago invites Vietnam War Veterans to fly based on the order in which their application is received. Vietnam Veterans who apply now will be invited during our 2027 flight season, which begins in April and runs through October, with one flight per month. WWII and Korean War Veterans who apply now will be invited on the next available flight"

More information and copies of our application are available at our website, www.HonorFlightChicago.org, or by calling our office at 773.227.8387



K9s for Veterans Supports Chicagoland Veterans with PTSD

For many U.S. military veterans living with post-traumatic stress disorder, recovery can be a long and deeply personal journey. K9s for Veterans is working to make that path less isolating by pairing veterans with trained service dogs that provide daily support and companionship.

K-9 for Veterans, a non-profit, matches veterans with rescue dogs that are trained to assist with the challenges of PTSD. The initiative not only helps veterans manage symptoms such as anxiety and isolation but also gives rescued canines a second chance at life.

The program's approach reflects a central idea often expressed by participants: "Who rescued who?" As Michael Tellerino, CEO and founder of K9s for Veterans, said, "It's amazing what these dogs do. The dogs are trained for multiple purposes. Trained to help veterans make the transition at home."

In addition to training and placement, K9s for Veterans covers the full cost of care for each service dog, including free food and basic medical care for the life of the dog. This removes a significant financial burden for veterans and helps ensure the long-term well-being of the animals.

K9s for Veterans' mission is to help veterans with PTSD transition back to civilian life after military service ends, and it is committed to educating the public about veterans living with PTSD and streamlining the process for getting service dogs.

IDVA partners with programs like K9s for Veterans to highlight the role of community support and innovative care in addressing the ongoing needs of veterans adjusting to civilian life. [More information is available here.](#)

For more information on applications and how to qualify for a service dog, please [visit here](#).



★ ★ ★ ★ ★ IDVA is Hiring!

IDVA continues to recruit, train, and hire for positions across the agency, including medical professionals, dietitians, social workers, activities professionals, IT staff, engineers, groundskeepers, and support staff. Serving veterans is meaningful and rewarding. The State of Illinois offers excellent benefit packages and flexibility. To help position candidates, IDVA offers virtual job fairs to learn about applying for Illinois state positions, interviewing, and resume tips. Check out the schedule and register for a virtual job fair that might work for you.

To learn more about jobs at IDVA, [visit here](#).



**STATE OF ILLINOIS
CAREER FAIR**

VFW Taylorville
behind Ace Hardware
515 N. West Avenue
Taylorville, IL 62568
July 8, 2026
10AM-3PM

This all-agency career fair represents a unique opportunity for attendees to explore career paths within the public sector and put their best foot forward, including on-site resume-building workshops designed to help candidates when applying for State positions.

This event is open to all including mid-senior level professionals, community members, college students, and those seeking a career change!

OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE

- Child Protection
- Attorneys
- Architects & Engineers
- Project Managers
- Fiscal/Audit/Grants
- Leadership & Management
- Nurses and other Healthcare Positions
- Correctional Officer Trainees
- Educators
- Environmental Scientists
- Temporary/seasonal
- And More!



★ Serve those who served ★		
Join IDVA for a series of virtual job fairs to learn more about becoming part of Team IDVA		
Date	Time	Event Registration
7/1/2026	2:30-3:15 PM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees
7/2/2026	2:00-2:45 PM	How to read a Job Bulletin
7/6/2026	1:30-2:15 PM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points
7/9/2026	5:30-6:15 PM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward
7/10/2026	10:00-10:45AM	Interview Tips and Tricks
7/14/2026	2:00-2:45 PM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward
7/20/2026	5:30-6:15 PM	How to read a Job Bulletin
7/22/2026	9:00-9:45 AM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees
7/24/2026	2:00-2:45 PM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points
7/27/2026	10:00-10:45 AM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward
7/28/2026	2:30-3:15PM	Interview Tips and Tricks

Ann Holladay, IDVA Recruiter & HR Specialist, participated in the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Juneteenth family event at the Old State Capitol. Families were offered tours of the State Capitol and witnessed a reenactment with "President" Abraham Lincoln. IDVA also challenged families with a Juneteenth word search.



★ ★ ★ ★ ★ CNA Week: We're Unbelievable

IDVA celebrated its teams of Veteran Nurse Aid-certified (VNAC) for contributing to its mission of caring for the whole person. Their incredible work delivers dignified, compassionate care and provides a warm and nurturing environment for our residents living in the five state veterans' homes and two independent living centers. IDVA VNACs are unbelievable, and we are grateful they have chosen IDVA to serve those who served.





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 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**

★ Follow us

