



VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 4, Issue 11 ★ November 2024

★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince



Veterans Day was a huge success across Illinois. Veterans were honored at special events hosted by municipalities, veteran service organizations, and communities. Team IDVA staff members spent the week at ceremonies, large and small, including planning the Springfield Veterans Day Parade. I am so proud of the way our team shows up for veterans and seeing the deep commitment they have to truly serve those who served.

Throughout the year, IDVA Veterans Service Officers (VSO) recognize the importance of being in the community to educate veterans about our services. Whether it is participating in a parade, or staffing a table at an outreach event, VSOs are the personal concierge into accessing the numerous benefits that veterans have earned. If you are a veteran service organization, academic institution, municipality, or community group and would like a VSO to speak at an event or provide a resource table, please submit your request here: [IDVA SPECIAL EVENT ATTENDANCE REQUEST](#).

As we move quickly into the holiday season, one of the truly honorable things we do is the annual Gold Star Family Christmas Tree Lighting. This year, it will be held on December 9th at the Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library in Springfield. There, we will honor the 344 heroes who gave their lives in defense of our freedom—along with the Gold Star families who were left to mourn their loss. Each of the fallen will have an individual ornament honoring their sacrifice and after the ceremony, the tree will be displayed for the rest of the month. Thank you for your continuing respect to the Illinois men and women—along with their Gold Star families—who gave the ultimate sacrifice.

As the calendar turns to a new year, I want to remind all of you of IDVA's continued commitment to Illinois veterans, families, caregivers and survivors. Our vision is to make Illinois the destination of choice for veterans and a national leader in veteran advocacy and services. This all starts with the dedicated staff of professionals at IDVA, who are all committed to teamwork, excellence, accountability and motivation—in everything they do. It is not lost on me that the PEOPLE of IDVA are the most valuable asset of this organization and when they flourish, veterans in Illinois thrive.

In closing, IDVA is wholly dedicated to the experience our veterans have when working with the agency. As stated in our strategy, nothing is more important to me than ensuring veterans have easy access to a modern network of services and that when they look for help, IDVA will be their North Star, always guiding them safely home. They are our reason for existence, and we will leave no stone unturned to help them with the opportunity to thrive in Illinois.

Happy Holidays to you and yours and thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

Sincerely,

Terry Prince, U.S. Navy Veteran and IDVA Director

Veterans Day

The Village and Park District of Bensenville hosted a well-attended and thoughtful annual Veterans Day breakfast and program, including patriotic music by the Fenton High School choir and band, remarks by dignitaries, and readings by Fenton High School student winners of the Defending Freedoms essay contest. IDVA Chief of Staff Jassen Strokosch provided remarks along with Matthew Baker, Major General, U.S. Army, retired.

The first, second, and third-place winners of the Defending Freedoms essay contest each read their submissions. Please enjoy the winner Aidan Wazir's essay (published with permission). You may view the three finalists reading their [essays here](#).

When addressing an audience it's of vital importance to know who you're talking to. And it is just as important for them to know what you, as the speaker, are talking about. The theme presented to me before writing was "Defenders of Freedom." I then had a realization that not only is that the topic, but also my audience. You are the defenders of freedom, that is the utter truth. We as students repeat it, every morning, sometimes without truly understanding the depth of the words we are reciting "The land of the free, and the home of the brave." That is truly the anthem of the American spirit. I am proud to be an American, Not only because of the American dream, but also because of the spirit and belief which comes from understanding our loved veterans. Yes, some of my generation are too naive, arrogant or blind to appreciate the service you have given our home. That is the unfortunate truth. But those who were raised on the base of respect, honor, and love, are empowered by listening to your stories and hearing your lessons.

Moving forward, to define a defender of freedom, I think you have to first define freedom. Freedom is an often overused word but is also even more important than people make it seem. It's powerful enough to fight for, deep enough to dedicate your life to, and beautiful enough to sacrifice yourself just so your loved ones can have it. That comes with losses, sacrifices, trials, and tribulations. Hard memories that we will never understand. You took those upon yourselves so we may be standing here today. I am a product of the free public school system. I am allowed to practice my faith and religion with the assurance of my freedom to do so. I am allowed to pursue big dreams and goals by taking advantage of the opportunities that are given to me. In a couple moments this speech will be over as time will fly by. But I truly hope that if you grasp anything from it, you grasp this. That it was worth it. That many hearts have a deep respect for what you have given yourselves for. We want you to know that it was the honorable thing to do and we are grateful. That the American dream is not dead. That the American people are not asleep. That the quiet moments of questioning yourself, saddens us. Because you are seen, appreciated, and loved. Even if you don't always feel it. With all that has been said, I hope the upcoming final words now have a little more meaning. Thank you for your service.



IDVA Chief of Staff Jassen Strokosch speaks at the Bensenville Veterans Day breakfast.



Fenton High School Essay finalists. From left to right: IDVA Chief of Staff Jassen Strokosch, 3rd place essayist Thomas Klos, 2nd place essayist Leslie Diaz, 1st place essayist Aidan Wazir, Fenton High School Military History class instructor Frank Kekstadt, and Matthew Baker, Major General, U.S. Army, Retired.

Field Services

Throughout November, IDVA Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) dispersed across the state at over 30 special event engagements including Morgan County, Elmhurst, Worth Township, Lake Zurich, Richton Park, Joliet, and Dixmoor as well as events hosted by Nicor Steel, Exelon, and the Salvation Army. Senior staff also participated in several Veterans Day events.

As the month of the veterans centered around Veterans Day, this is a critical time of year to meet veterans where they are. IDVA VSOs are dedicated to participating in community events to share their knowledge and expertise. They also attend as veterans themselves. Each VSO is a war-era veteran, many who have participated in combat operations, and have a passion for their fellow veterans and how they can support them.

“Thank you for the work you do. I thank you for your service to our veterans, state, and country. You change lives through your service on a daily basis, said Field Services Manager Mark Patterson, “I couldn’t be prouder of you and thankful for my opportunity to serve with you.”



Veterans Appreciation Luncheon, Schaumburg: Left to Right: Matthew Steward (Schaumburg Township Trustee), Tim Heneghan (Supervisor of Schaumburg Township), and Michelle Mussman (State Representative 56th District).



Left to right: US Army veteran Milana Herman, US Army veteran and IDVA Northern Region Supervisor Melissa Beckford, US Navy veteran and IDVA Director Terry Prince, US Marine Corps veteran Melody Brocato, and U.S. Army veteran Stephanie Jordan, featured in the documentary, “Take Your Own Notes,” attended the Winnebago County Veterans Day program. Take Your Own Notes features women veterans from the Rockford area. For more information, visit: [Take Your Own Notes \(2023\) — The Movie Database \(TMDb\)](#)



Veteran Service Officer Anthony Hernandez at The Mokena Junior HS Veterans Day assembly and dinner.



Morgan County Veteran Service Officers Lauralee Treece and Matthew Allen hosted a Veterans' Fall Benefit Fair at the Jacksonville VFW. Vendors included Illinois Joining Forces, Vet Center, Salvation Army, Morgan County General Assistance, VA Illiana Healthcare Center, and Home Instead.

Field Services



Northern Region Supervisor Melissa Beckford with a therapy horse from BraveHearts, the largest healing horsemanship program in the nation, at the Top of Illinois Stand Off.



Veteran Service Officer Shynae Murphy at the Salvation Army Veteran's Day Event.



Veteran Service Officer Dave Illa at a legislative luncheon and expo at the Knights of Columbus in Lake Zurich.



Veteran Service Officer Gerald Enriquez, Army veteran, was interviewed by WGN TV at the Worth Township Veterans Event while representing IDVA and sharing resources with veterans.



Veteran Service Officer Malon Norfleet with former IDVA Director and VP, Customer Strategy, Exelon, Erin Borggren, at the Exelon Veterans Day event.



Chief of Staff Jassen Strokosch with the IDVA Central Region VSO team at the Veterans' Home at Quincy. They gathered for a tour of the Homes' new buildings, part of a nearly \$300 million project, and conducted a regional meeting.

Front row left to right: Alfredo Rocha (Sangamon), Diane Moncrief (Champaign), Marilda Eadie (Coles), Jeff Eagler (Macon), Michele Hansen Hoback (McLean), Mark Patterson, Kimberly Yantis, Back row left to right: Dan Brown (Admin Assistant), Lauralee Treece (Morgan), Melinda Makinney (Peoria), Kurt Cochran (Christian), Dan Ebker (McLean), Kayla Bair (McDonough), Matt Allen (Morgan), William Linder (Adams), Jeremy Hoelscher (Adams).



Veteran Service Officer Gerald Enriquez with Vincent Webster, Veteran Representative for True Vine Methodist Baptist Church at the Dixmoor Veterans Event.

Operation Rising Spirit Launches



IDVA's Operation Rising Spirit annual holiday campaign is a tradition to bring cheer to veterans in our skilled nursing homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy. This year, we are encouraging volunteering in one of our Homes. Volunteers enrich the lives of veterans by supporting events, outings, programs, and parties. We welcome volunteers during the holiday season and throughout the year to contribute to our mission of caring for the whole person – mind, body, and spirit. The connection brings value to the volunteer and the veteran by building strong and lasting friendships. Serving those who served is meaningful and rewarding.

As Manteno Home volunteer and U.S. Army veteran said about his volunteering, "Selfishly speaking, it has been therapeutic for my PTSD. It's the best thing I've ever done, but these guys give me so much – more than I could possibly give them. It's how you get to talk and listen to the veterans about their stories, it really brings home how fortunate I've been."

The Homes have a wide variety of volunteer needs including:

- In-house Transportation (church services, activities, barber/beauty appointments)
- Crafts (woodworking/weaving, knitting)
- Gardening
- Fishing
- Music (instrument/singing)
- Parties (holiday/seasonal/birthday)
- Events (remembrance days, parties, etc.)
- Games (cards/board games/bingo)
- Coffee and meal visits
- Walks
- Assisting with incoming donations

To learn more about volunteering and/or to apply visit: [Veterans' Homes](#).

Like so many organizations throughout COVID-19, we lost many volunteers. Building back our volunteer base is critical to providing important services and opportunities for residents in its care.

Come join us in serving those who served.

Illinois Lottery Ticket Benefiting Veteran Service Organizations

The Illinois Lottery \$200,000 Bingo Tripler Instant Ticket, now on sale, benefits veteran service organizations by allocating a portion of the \$5 proceeds directly to IDVA for distribution through its Veterans Cash Grant program. The grants aim to address critical issues facing veterans including homelessness, post-traumatic stress treatment, behavioral health treatment, and workforce development.

Each quarter, IDVA's committee reviews applications and awards grants to groups that have demonstrated proven need. Eligibility is open to government agencies, not-for-profits, veterans' organizations, and tax-exempt entities currently providing veterans' assistance or wishing to expand their services into veterans' assistance. Grants range between \$25,000 and \$100,000.

For more information on the Veterans' Cash Grants program, [visit here](#).

Those who purchase the \$200,000 Bingo Tripler Instant Ticket have a chance to win up to \$200,000 and are also you're also making a direct impact on Illinois veterans.

Learn more about how this ticket supports veterans [here](#).



Team IDVA

Join us in welcoming adjutants to the Veterans' Homes at Chicago and LaSalle.

Veterans' Home at LaSalle

After several years of leading admissions at the Veterans' Home at LaSalle, Maria Reed now serves as its adjutant. Other roles included reimbursement officer, office assistant, and executive secretary. Before her career in state government, Maria was a district sales manager for an advertising and marketing company and a news reporter/anchor. Maria holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Mass Communication with a Minor in English from Illinois State University. She and her husband live in Princeton with their two boys and enjoy spending time at the kids' sporting activities, swimming, and enjoying the outdoors.

Veterans Home at Chicago

Antonio Mannings joins the Veterans' Home at Chicago after serving as the Public Service Administrator-Project Manager for the Illinois Department of Human Services where he spearheaded a range of projects aimed at enhancing operational efficiency and service delivery. He is a highly skilled project manager with over a decade of leadership experience in government, education, and technology. He holds advanced degrees in Organizational Leadership and Business and certifications including Project Management Professional (PMP), Certified ScrumMaster (CSM), and Agile Hybrid Project Pro. Antonio is committed to leveraging his expertise to support and enhance the services provided to veterans, ensuring their needs are met with the highest level of care and operational precision.



Attorney General Raoul Urges Eligible Service Members and Veterans to File Claims with Harris Jewelry by December 21st

Attorney General Kwame Raoul urged service members and veterans eligible to receive refunds under a 2022 settlement with Harris Jewelry to file claims [on the company's website](#) on or before December 21st. As a result of a settlement, Attorney General Raoul, 17 attorneys general, and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reached in 2022 with the national jewelry retailer, service members and veterans who were deceived into paying for lifetime protection plans on low-quality jewelry without disclosures between January 2014 and July 2022 may be eligible for restitution.

The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District ordered Harris Jewelry to reopen its portal to allow defrauded consumers to file claims for refunds as a result of the [July 2022 settlement](#). The settlement required Harris Jewelry to cancel \$21.3 million in debt for more than 13,000 people and provide \$12.8 million in refunds for more than 40,000 deceived consumers. Over 30,000 consumers remain eligible for refunds from a fund exceeding \$8 million.

Harris Jewelry deceived active-duty service members and veterans by claiming the company could improve personal credit lines if they enrolled in the company's financing program and invested in its jewelry products. However, service members were burdened with high interest rates, thousands of dollars of debt and poor-quality jewelry, and poor-quality jewelry, which ultimately damaged personal credit scores. Harris Jewelry was also responsible for inflating prices and adding hidden fees without disclosures while promising to make charitable donations to Operation Troop Aid Inc.

The 2022 settlement required Harris Jewelry to stop collecting outstanding debts, provide refunds to thousands of service members, correct bad credit scores, and dissolve all of the company's businesses. As part of the agreement, Harris Jewelry stopped collecting \$21,307,229 in outstanding debt held by 13,426 service members. Harris Jewelry also vacated judgments against 112 consumers totaling \$115,335.64 and deleted any negative credit entries reported to consumer reporting agencies.

Attorney General Raoul encourages any eligible service member or veteran experiencing an issue [filing a claim](#) to call his office's Military and Veterans' Rights Helpline at 800-382-3000 for assistance.

The Military and Veterans Rights Bureau also offers in-person or virtual presentations on service member employment rights, military veterans assistance, as well as fraud and scams that target veterans and their benefits. Information about future training opportunities can be obtained by emailing mvr@ilag.gov.



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.

IDVA ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS

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