



# VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 4, Issue 7 ★ July 2024



## ★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

Friends, we are so excited to share that Navy Week 2024 is coming to the City of Chicago from August 5-11, where more than 75 sailors from across the nation will volunteer throughout the community and demonstrate why the Navy matters to Chicago. This will be the fifth time that Navy Week has been hosted in the Chicagoland area and will feature in-person demonstrations, performances, and engagements throughout the week:

- **Senior Navy Leaders** – Vice Adm. Douglas Perry, Commander, Joint Forces Norfolk
- **Namesake Sailors** – Sailors serving aboard the Virginia-class submarines USS Illinois (SSN 786) and the USS Hyman G. Rickover (SSN 795)
- **U.S. Navy Band Great Lakes** – Performances and masterclasses with Navy musicians
- Naval History and Heritage Command – Educational presentations and lesson plans about the deep ties between Chicago and the Navy
- **USS Constitution** – Demonstrations about the oldest commissioned ship in the Navy
- **U.S. Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command** – Educational presentations on the importance of atmospheric and oceanographic science and the overall value of STEM education to the Navy
- **Navy Talent Acquisition Group** – Educational presentations, community service projects, and static displays

IDVA is especially pleased to welcome Sailors to the Illinois Veterans' Home at Chicago on three occasions including: A Vietnam War Veteran pinning ceremony, a Chicago Cubs game watch, and a beautification project. As a 31-year Navy veteran from the Midwest, I am particularly honored that Navy Week 2024 has selected the Veterans' Home at Chicago to visit. Their interest in engaging and honoring our veterans is meaningful to our entire community.

Since 2005, the U.S. Navy has brought Sailors into America's cities to volunteer and engage with communities. It is the Navy's primary outreach program and is designed to communicate how vital the Navy is to protect our freedoms. The week-long event partners with corporate, civic, government, education, media, veterans, community service, and diversity organizations throughout each city.

The Blue Angles, the Navy Parachute Team, Navy bands, Navy divers, ship and submarine crews, hometown Sailors, medical personnel, USS Constitution Sailors and equipment, and Navy recruiting all participate in the program.

For a complete list of public programming, visit: [Navy Outreach | Navy Weeks 2024 | Chicago Illinois](#).

Sincerely,

**Terry Prince**

U.S. Navy Veteran and IDVA Director

# ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Monthly Highlights

## Springfield and DuQuoin State Fairs

### Veterans Day at the Springfield State Fair: Sunday, August 11th

Springfield, IL – The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA), the Illinois Department of Agriculture, and the [Illinois State Fair](#) invite veterans and their family members to enjoy a free day at the Illinois State Fair on Sunday, August 11, 2024. This annual event offers programs, music, and a resource fair. The event concludes with a parade led by Governor JB Pritzker, IDVA Director Terry Prince, along with veterans' organizations, JROTC teams, and IDVA staff. This year's theme is "Serving the Generations."

Veterans and their families may present any form of military ID for free admission. Parking is not included.

The schedule of events is as follows:

10:00 am - 2:00 pm	JROTC Competition
11:00 am - 11:30 am	Welcome to Veterans Day: Lincoln Stage
11:30 am - 12:30 pm	144th Army Band of Performance
1:00 pm - 2:30 pm	Entertainment
3:00 pm	JROTC Award Ceremony
4:00 pm	Veterans Day Parade

For more information, visit: [Sunday, August 11 - Veterans & Gold Star Families Day - Daily Schedule \(illinois.gov\)](#)

### Veterans Day at the DuQuoin State Fair: Sunday, August 25th

Check IDVA's website: [Department of Veterans Affairs \(illinois.gov\)](#) and Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/IllinoisDepartmentOfVeteransAffairs> for more information. Visit the Fair's website to learn about its programs and events: [DuQuoin State Fair \(illinois.gov\)](#)





# Monthly Highlights



Finding employment that reflects a veteran's skillsets, experience, and aspirations is one of the greatest challenges veterans have in transitioning from service. To bring awareness among employers and the nation about our veterans seeking employment, every year on July 25th is National Hire a Veteran Day.

Veterans come with a wide variety of skills and qualities, making them excellent employees. They are natural leaders and collaborators because of their military training that focuses on teamwork and leadership. Their military life creates discipline and a strong work ethic. Many have different, specialized technical training, offering employers an individual with a solid foundation that can be useful in industries nationwide.

To learn more about employment for veterans, visit: <https://www.va.gov/careers-employment/>



On July 26, 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 into law. This civil rights law protects individuals with disabilities against discrimination and guarantees them equal rights and opportunities. ADA prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities from employment and businesses, ensures equal access to services such as telecommunication assistance and public places, and protection from any retaliation or coercion.

Among the many individuals celebrated during Disability Pride Month are veterans. According to the Center of Research on Disability and the American Community Survey, nearly two million veterans 18 years and older reported having a military service-connected disability rating of almost 70 percent or more. Many of the most common injuries and disabilities include amputations, brain injuries, PTSD, and Gulf War Syndrome.

The month of July recognizes the diversity, resilience, and contributions of people with disabilities, especially those who have served our country with honor and courage. To learn more about veteran disabilities and what resources are available, visit [www.va.gov/disability/](http://www.va.gov/disability/)

*IDVA Director Terry Prince addresses the community of Montgomery at a ceremony unveiling two monuments honoring the service and sacrifices of veterans, first responders, and essential workers. The Veterans Memorial monument recognizes the service and sacrifice of veterans. The second monument is dedicated to first responders and essential workers. The monuments are located along the west bank of the Fox River in Montgomery Park.*

## How To Connect and Work with Your Local IDVA Veteran Service Officer

IDVA is eager to connect with veterans throughout Illinois and has developed user-friendly tools to make this easier, especially with the increased accessibility of technology. Below you will learn the most efficient means of reaching and connecting with IDVA.

**Find a VSO:** IDVA's website VSO locator is a user-friendly tool for veterans to locate their nearest VSO. By selecting a county or scanning the list of offices, veterans can find a location, hours of operation, and contact information. Women veterans may also locate a woman VSO. To find a local VSO, visit: [VSO Locator County List \(illinois.gov\)](https://illinois.gov/vso-locator)

**VSO Support Request:** Veterans may also request communication from a VSO by completing the support request form located on the IDVA website: [VSO Support Request \(illinois.gov\)](https://illinois.gov/vso-support-request)

**IDVA Special Event Attendance Request:** An organization hosting or sponsoring an event and interested in a VSO speaking or providing onsite resources may make a request here: [IDVA Special Event Attendance Request \(illinois.gov\)](https://illinois.gov/idva-special-event-attendance-request)

**Veterans Service Officer Survey:** To ensure that veterans are receiving the highest level of service from IDVA, a Veteran Service Office Visit Survey is available. The survey is confidential, and each submission is reviewed by a region supervisor to ensure that concerns are addressed. The survey is located here: [Veteran Service Office Visit Survey \(surveymonkey.com\)](https://surveymonkey.com/veteran-service-office-visit-survey)



Veteran Service Officer Alfredo (Freddy) Rocha, Sangamon County, attended the Illinois 105th VFW State Convention June 6-8, 2024, in Springfield.

## New VA Mobile App

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) is now offering the USDVA VA: Health and Benefits application for service members, veterans, and their family members to access their VA health care and benefits from their mobile phones or tablets anywhere and anytime.

The VA: Health and Benefits app can be downloaded for free on iOS and Android devices through their respective app stores.

Features of the app include:

- Refill/track VA prescriptions.
- Send/receive secure messages
- Review/add appointments to the mobile calendar
- Access vaccination records
- Check disability rating
- Submit/review claim or appeal
- Download common VA benefits letters
- Show proof of veteran status
- Update direct deposit and review pay
- Facility Locator
- Find local VA facilities
- Quick access to the Veterans Crisis line

With the VA: Health and Benefits app, managing VA health care, benefits, and payments is simple and convenient. For more information on ways to connect with the VA, visit: [Connect to VA care – Veterans Health Administration](https://www.va.gov/health-benefits).



Michelle Richards, Veteran Service Officer, and Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager/ Women Veteran's Coordinator, participated in the Chicago Standdown on Friday, July 12th at the General Jones Armory, 5200 South Cottage Grove Avenue. Attended by nearly 400 veterans, the event provided veterans in need with the opportunity to obtain housing, establish a source of income; and stabilize medical conditions.

# News from the Capitol

In Congress, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs is the authorizing committee for the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA). The committee recommends legislation to create, expand, curtail, or fine-tune existing laws related to veterans' benefits. It is a bipartisan committee with U.S. Representative Mike Bost (IL-12) serving as the Chairman and U.S. Representatives Nikki Budzinski (IL-13) and Delia Ramirez (IL-3) serving as members.

The following are recently introduced pending bills:

## **Chairman Bost**

[H.R. 5530](#) protects veterans' access to emergency transportation by limiting the Secretary of Veterans Affairs' ability to change the payment or reimbursement rate. The Secretary will not be able to change the rate of payment or reimbursement unless the Secretary increases the rate or conducts a review to justify the change. The bill was introduced to the 118th Congress on September 18, 2023, by Chairman Mike Bost (IL-12). On April 16, 2024, it was forwarded to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

## **Congresswoman Budzinski**

On July 8th, Nikki Budzinski (IL-13), Mike Bost (IL-12), and other representatives introduced the bipartisan [Improving VA Training for Military Sexual Trauma Claims Act](#). This Act will improve, update, and enforce VA employee training for those who interact with veterans and make determinations on military sexual trauma (MST) claims. Additionally, the Act will require the VA to obtain service and personnel records filed for in-service personal assault.

## **Congresswoman Ramirez**

[H.R. 1767](#) was introduced by Representative Ramirez (IL-03), to ensure that if a student who receives educational assistance benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs is unable to complete a course or program, the VA will not be charged or will be reimbursed for the course or program. Factors include: the course or program was suspended or terminated based on information collected as part of a VA risk-based survey, the Department of Education determining that the institution committed an actionable act or omission that had a detrimental effect on direct loan borrowers, or the Federal Trade Commission or Department of Education determines fraud. This bill establishes a uniform process that protects student veterans and their GI Bill education benefits. The bill was introduced to the 118th Congress on March 23rd, 2023, passed the House, and on May 1st, 2024, it was received in the Senate and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs.



## Volunteers Beautify the Veterans' Homes at Anna and LaSalle



*Constellation Energy Nuclear Plant at the Veterans' Home at LaSalle*

**The Veterans' Home at LaSalle's** Volunteer Services Coordinator Bailie Bongartz recruited 29 volunteers from the Constellation Energy Nuclear Plant to beautify the Home's landscaping. The volunteers weeded, edged, and mulched nine courtyards throughout the Home's campus. They also trimmed and transplanted trees and shrubbery and power-washed memorial benches.



*Team McGee Fager Construction at the Veterans' Home at Anna*

**The Veterans' Home at Anna's** landscaping was enhanced by a team of superintendents from Fager McGee Construction, who volunteered their time and resources, including plants and rocks. The Home is currently undergoing a renovation project also overseen by Fager McGee.

IDVA is grateful to the volunteers who enthusiastically shared their time and talent to create beautiful spaces for the veterans and their families to enjoy.

### 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](mailto: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/>.

# ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Women Veterans

## Admiral Michelle Janine Howard

### Featured Woman Veteran

Michelle Janine Howard was the first African American Woman to command a United States Navy combatant ship, the USS Rushmore. She was the first woman promoted to four-star admiral, making her the highest-ranking woman in U.S. Armed Forces history and the highest-ranking African American woman in Navy history. Howard also became the first woman four-star admiral to command operational forces when she assumed command of the U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Naval Forces Africa and Allied Joint Forces Command Naples (NATO).

Howard was interviewed for Forbes Magazine where she provided leadership lessons regarding the workforce, workplace, and the future of both. Howard stated that her goal is to create an environment where personal and professional milestones can be in harmony.

"The sailors get me up in the morning. I am pretty darn proud to serve with this group of people, and I'm at the point in my career where I feel a heavy obligation to make the Navy a place they want to continue to stay in and become the leadership themselves. Whatever goals we set for ourselves we know we can go higher. I'm obligated to help set that legacy."

Howard was born in 1960 at the March Air Force Base in California, the daughter of the United States Air



Force Master Sergeant Nick Howard and Phillipa Howard. She graduated from Gateway High School in Aurora, Colorado. She earned her bachelor's degree from the United States Naval Academy and a Master of Military Art & Science from the United States Command and General Staff College USS Lexington.

Howard retired from the United States Navy on December 1, 2017, after 36 years of service.

#### References:

[Admiral Michelle Howard > United States Navy > Display Past Woman Bio](#)

[Leadership Lessons From Admiral Michelle Howard, The Highest Ranking Woman In Naval History \(forbes.com\)](#)

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.**