



VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 5, Issue 1 ★ January 2025

★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince



Happy New Year! As is usually the case, the New Year has brought a lot of change. Between the inauguration of a new President, the beginning of the release of hostages in Gaza, devastating fires in California, blizzards in the South, and the crowning of new college football champions, there's hardly a moment to keep up with everything that is happening--not to mention what each of us has going on in our own lives. It's a lot!

The good news however is that your Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs stands ready. Ready to be the North Star for any veteran looking to navigate the challenging labyrinth of benefits that are available to them. And while many of the things happening in the world may be outside of your control, the people of IDVA remain focused on what we can do, and that is elevating our service to veterans by hiring great employees, ensuring a superior experience at our residential homes and making sure we have top-notch Veteran Service Officers in the field. We had a great year serving veterans, but we want to get even better. Just two weeks ago, the IDVA executive leadership team met off-site to reflect on the past year and dig deep into our successes and challenges. We are leaning heavily into using data to drive and enhance our service delivery without losing sight of our most important mission of serving those who served. You can be sure we are hard at work creating action plans to ensure 2025 is even more successful than last year!

Illinois' veterans have so much to look forward to this year. IDVA's VSO team is expanding to meet veterans in their communities, and we have leased new office spaces to be more accessible. The Veterans' Home at Quincy welcomed its first 37 residents into its new Independent Living Domiciliary and we expect the skilled care home to open sometime soon. This \$300M investment reflects Illinois' commitment to the Quincy community and is a visual demonstration to veterans, that we are forever grateful for their service. In addition to this project, we have completed major renovations at the Anna Home while the LaSalle and Manteno Homes are currently undergoing much anticipated restoration and rehabilitation.

I invite you to read through this newsletter to learn more about important veteran benefits and IDVA programs and events, including our latest effort to honor 25 women veteran leaders in 2025!

Thank you for staying connected to IDVA and have a great year!

Sincerely,

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

National Veterans Legal Services Program Provides Free Appeals Service

IDVA and the National Veterans Legal Services Program (NVLSP) are partners in assisting veterans in filing claims with the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) after the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA) upheld a denial of benefits issued by the regional office of jurisdiction. This partnership, established in October 2022, is instrumental in assisting veterans in the arduous process of appealing decisions and obtaining their earned benefits.

The process works like this: the claim originates with an IDVA VSO. If it is denied by the VA Regional Office, an appeal is filed by IDVA to the BVA. If the BVA upholds the denial, the claimant, IDVA, and NVLSP are notified. NVLSP reviews the case for errors of law and offers assistance at no cost to the veteran.

“Our VSOs work closely with NVLSP and the appeals success has been transformative for many veterans,” said Mark Patterson, IDVA Field Services Manager, “The process requires persistence, and NVLSP represents veterans with expertise and a passion for ensuring all the facts are revealed and they receive their earned benefits.”

IDVA’s Southern Region Supervisor Jeffrey Lewis recently partnered with a veteran and NVLSP on an appeal after being denied benefits for tinnitus. The appeal resulted in significant retro pay and most importantly hearing aids and access to medical benefits from the VA he was originally deemed ineligible.

The NVLSP’s semi-quarterly report to Illinois indicates the disposition of 41 appeals as of November 30, 2024. In summary, 22 veterans (54%) accepted NVLSP representation and prevailed. Nine veterans (22%) accepted and have active appeals before the CAVC. Eight veterans (20%) declined the NVLSP offer, one veteran (2%) withdrew their appeal post-acceptance, and one veteran (2%) has not yet responded to an offer of assistance.

The NVLSP represents appeals nationally and has a similar partnership with several other states, providing decades of service and legal expertise to veterans and their families.

VA Healthcare

My HealtheVet, the patient portal for VA health care that allows veterans to order VA prescriptions, view VA appointments, send secure messages to VA providers, and gain access to their VA patient records, is changing to a simplified, more secure sign-in process. Veterans and other beneficiaries will no longer be able to use usernames and passwords for My HealtheVet after **January 31, 2025**, or DS Logon after **September 30, 2025**. They will need to sign in with either a **Login.gov** or **ID.me** account.

VA has prepared a helpful webpage with tips for creating your **Login.gov** or **ID.me** account. The page advises how to register and troubleshoot issues if difficulties surface. [Sign in or create an account | Veterans Affairs](#).

View this tutorial video on how to log in to establish your new account: [Preparing for VA sign-in changes](#)

Veterans will still be able to coordinate their care in person or via the phone.

Questions can be directed to the Marion VA Health Care System team. Call My HealtheVet Coordinator Will DuVall at (618) 364-2423.


Job Opportunities at IDVA

Whatever your skill might be, IDVA offers a wide range of positions to become part of the team serving veterans. In our homes, IDVA seeks medical professionals, dietitians, physical therapists, activities professionals, volunteer coordinators, and more. IDVA is expanding its team of Veteran Service Officers across the state. Its central office provides the Homes and VSOs support including HR, Fiscal, Legislative, and Communications.

While we are actively recruiting, the IDVA team provides resources and tools to learn how to apply for Illinois State employment and other important job search and interviewing skills. Click on the QR codes to learn more and register for an online seminar.

★ Serve those who served ★

Join IDVA for a series of virtual job fairs to learn more about becoming part of Team IDVA

Date	Time	HFS Virtual	Event Registration
2/1/2025	9:00-9:45 A.M.	Creating a Profile	
2/3/2025	7:30-8:15 A.M.	How to Read a Job Bulletin	
2/3/2025	6:30- 7:15 P.M.	Interview Tips and Tricks	
2/4/2025	10:00-10:45 A.M.	How to Certify Your Veterans Points	
2/4/2025	2:00-2:45 P.M.	IDVA Extraordinary Employees	
2/5/2025	1:00-1:45 P.M.	How to Read a Job Bulletin	
2/5/2025	6:30- 7:15 P.M.	Creating a Profile	
2/6/2025	8:30-9:15 A.M.	Interview Tips and Tricks	
2/6/2025	2:00-2:45 P.M.	How to Certify Your Veterans Points	
2/22/2025	9:00-9:45 A.M.	Interview Tips and Tricks	

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Women Veterans

The IDVA Women's Veterans Program has launched an exciting program to feature 25 women veterans in 2025 who have demonstrated leadership, mentoring, and advocacy. The program is seeking nominations through February 21st. Who is your most admired woman veteran? Consider nominating her today.

★ 25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders of 2025 ★

Call for Nominations

We are seeking women Veterans in Illinois who demonstrate leadership, mentoring, and advocacy in their Veteran communities. Nominate yourself or another women Veteran to be recognized.

Nominations are open from **January 24, 2025 at 8:00 AM** and will close on **February 21, 2025 at 12:00 PM**.

Nomination Criteria

- Must be an Illinois Resident
- Military Service and Accomplishments
- Leadership and Mentorship in the Veterans' Community
- For full details on the Nominee Criteria, please review the survey

Website Link for Submission or scan QR Code

- <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/J59SKP2>



For any further questions

- Email: Angela.stpaul@va.gov
- Womenveterans@illinois.gov





American telephone girls arriving for "hello" duty in France, March 1918.

Hello Girls Congressional Gold Medal Act Honors Women Who Served in the Army as telephone Operators in World War I

The "Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025," awards a Congressional Gold Medal to the all-female, bi-lingual telephone operators of the Army Signal Corp Female Telephone Operator Unit, known as the "Hello Girls." The bipartisan legislation acknowledges 223 female veterans as deployed to a combat zone.

The "Hello Girls" were called to duty by General Pershing in 1917 to improve communications on the Western Front, particularly between American and French military forces. Their bi-lingual operators communicated critical, tactical information between the forces. Many were previously employed by telephone companies across the nation and trained at camps including Camp Grant, IL, Camp Fort Meade, MD, Camp Dodge, IA, Camp Devens, Ayers, MA, and Camp Lewis, WA. Operators fielded 26 million calls for the Army in France, while others managed switchboards in London, Southampton, and Winchester. Some traveled with General Pershing during the battles of Meuse-Argonne and Saint-Mihiel while others served at the headquarters of the American First Army, which was close to the front but not in the war zone. General Pershing attributed their contributions to ending the war a year earlier than anticipated.

Following the Armistice in 1918, many of the "Hello Girls" remained to support President Woodrow Wilson during the Versailles peace talks and returned home as late as 1920.

Although the "Hello Girls," served in the military, and wore Army uniforms, they were denied honorable discharge papers because they were considered civilian employees by the Army. They were denied veteran status, benefits, and services. Despite many efforts, it wasn't until November 1977, 60 years after the end of World War I, that they were finally recognized as veterans and received their honorable discharge papers.

The Congressional Gold Medal of Honor is a long-deserved recognition of their service and contributions to American history.



Veterans Cash Grant Program

PLAY WITH PURPOSE[®]

A part of every dollar you spend goes toward **Veteran support programs** in Illinois.



18+ Be Smart, Play Smart[®]

Game odds available at IllinoisLottery.com.



Support Illinois Veterans with the 7X Bingo Multiplier Instant Ticket Instant Ticket!

The Illinois Veterans Grants program, administered by the IDVA, is funded by the \$5 Illinois Lottery 7X Bingo Multiplier Instant Ticket. A portion of the proceeds of this ticket are directed to veterans programs that make a difference in the lives of veterans through housing assistance, job training, mental health services, and other critical programs. When purchasing a 7X Bingo Multiplier Instant Ticket, participants have a chance to win up to \$200,000, while also supporting veterans programs.

On July 1, 2024, the veteran specialty ticket was replaced, and IDVA is now part of the Joint Special Instant Scratch-Off game. Proceeds are shared with nine other causes through the \$5 7X's Bingo Multiplier scratch-off ticket, which is sold year-round.



Veterans' Homes

The Veterans' Home at Chicago veterans enjoyed the companionship of robotic animals designed to comfort and engage. Research reveals that robotic pups and "play" improve the quality of life for those, especially those with cognitive decline, by providing joy and companionship. The dogs are equipped with built-in sensors and speakers which help them respond to motion and touch. Their heartbeat, soft coat, and authentic sounds create a lifelike dog-owner experience.

Veterans' Home at Chicago residents Steven Dyer, U.S. Navy, and Albert Bruno, U.S. Army enjoy time with their "pets" with the help of Celene Hernandez, Activity Aide.



Activity Professionals Week

This month, IDVA honored the activity professionals in its five skilled residential homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy. It is evident in the smiles on their faces that they bring joy to the veterans. We are in awe of their creativity, boundless energy, and eagerness to create an environment that is engaging and inspiring for the veterans in our care. Activity Professionals enable IDVA to offer an experience that cares for the whole person – body – mind – and spirit. Activity Professionals are eager for volunteers to help them deliver the fun from Mardi Gras to baseball game watches to holiday parties. Learn more about volunteering at a Veterans' Home, [click here](#).

Veterans' Home at Anna



Tamara Graves (Activity Aide), Alinda Heron (Activity Therapist).

Veterans' Home at Chicago



Left to right: Ashley DiCristofano (Activity Aide) Julia Moreno (Activity Therapist), and Celene Hernandez (Activity Aide).

Veterans' Home at LaSalle



Left to right: Kasia Quigley (Activity Therapist), Jerry Bacidore (APA II), Mary McDermott (APA II), Taylor Schott (APA II).

Veterans' Home at Manteno



Left to right: Rachel Cunningham (Activity Aide), Shaniqua Clemens (Activity Aide), Debbie Harris (Activity Aide), Virisa Brock (Activity Aide), and Erin Keenan (Activity Director). Not pictured, Izzy Andrade (Activity Aide).



Left to right: Santa is Jerry Bacidore (APA II), Shantel Soldati (APA II), Lori Patrick (APA II), Bailie Bongartz (Director of Volunteer Services), Taylor Schott (APA II), Kassie Seaborn (APA II), Mary McDermott (APA II).

Veterans' Home at Quincy



Font Row Left to right: Bobbi Mock (Librarian), Tammy Baehr (Activity Aide), Rachel Stuckman (Activity Therapist), Marikkia Velez (Activity Aide), Kim Gilley (Activity Aide), Sandy Heaton (Office Assistant). Back Row Left to right: Deanna Marshall (Activity Aide), BJ Spangler (Activity Aide), Susan Nowell (Activity Therapist), Mia Meacher (Activity Therapist), Scott Alberts (Activity Therapist), Kathy Bernard (Activity Aide), Whittany Flambeau (Activity Aide), Sara Colgrove (Director of Activities).

The Governor's Challenge

Director Prince kicked-off the second of three of the Governor's Challenges' veteran suicide prevention trainings. With an ambitious goal of training over 70,000 healthcare professionals, first responders, and individuals in suicide prevention strategies and awareness, the Governor's Challenge enlisted experts to lead the training and provide concrete solutions and approaches.

The Governor's Challenge is a partnership between the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to bring the Governor's and Mayor's Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families to states and communities across the Nation.

To learn more about the training and the Governor's Challenge, visit: [IDHS: Illinois Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and their Families.](#)



Illinois Joining Forces

IDVA works along Illinois Joining Forces to provide resources and support for Illinois veterans. Its resource fair and town hall bring together innovative approaches to veteran services, and the Summit is an opportunity for service providers in the Southern region to connect. Come join us.



SOUTHERN ILLINOIS Veterans Town Hall & Resource Fair

Celebrating all eras of
Service Members, Veterans,
& Military Families.

WHERE:
The Pavilion
1602 Sioux Dr, Marion, IL 62959



Scan the QR code or visit our website at www.illinoisjoiningforces.org to register

Thursday, February 27, 2024
5:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

WHO: Individual Service Members, Veterans,
and Military Families
Online Registration & Military/Veteran ID required for entry*

Join Illinois Joining Forces for an opportunity to connect with Military and Veteran Resources in your area while enjoying a Veteran Town Hall and Q&A. Food will be provided.



Southern Illinois Regional Summit

Connecting industry leaders and
Veteran service providers in the
Southern Illinois region.

WHERE:
The Pavilion
1602 Sioux Dr,
Marion, IL 62959



Scan the QR code or visit our website at www.illinoisjoiningforces.org to register

Thursday, February 27, 2025
1:00 – 4:30 p.m. – Regional Summit
5:00 – 8:00 p.m. – Veterans Town Hall
& Resource Fair

WHO: Service Providers
Veterans, Military Community Members, and Family
Members over the age of 18 are also welcome to attend.

Join other industry leaders and Veteran service providers for an afternoon of connection, conversation, and collaboration. During the evening event, service providers will have the opportunity to set up a resource table during the Resource Fair for Veterans and their families.



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

★ Follow us

