



★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

Welcome to the October edition of *Veterans Connections* where you will find a recap of Gold Star Families Weekend, Breast Cancer Awareness Month resources, employment opportunities, field services updates, legislative education, and more. When I review all that the IDVA team puts forth in a month's time, I am overwhelmed by its ingenuity, stamina, and determination. We are serving veterans from a wide lens including the residential homes and VSOs who all tailor their work to the individual needs of veterans. In our homes, teams of medical professionals deliver personalized care while other staff design programming to enhance the daily life of veterans. Read on to learn about Ashley Benitez, support service for dietary in the Veterans' Home at Chicago, who bakes homemade cakes for veterans on their birthdays. What a beautiful gift from the heart. On countless occasions, a veteran may tell me a story about how one of our VSOs helped them get to what they needed to build a better life for him or herself and their family.

This is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and departments across the Agency, participated in a pink-out to illustrate our support for women around the world who have, or are actively battling, breast cancer. Please take time to review the resource page on page 7 to learn more about where you can find support and help.

Our next publication will be in November – Veterans Day. We are already planning an all-out IDVA stampede of the state where you will find us at events, ceremonies, and programs to commemorate Veterans Day. If you have an event in your local community, please reach out to us on IDVA.MEDIA@illinois.gov to share your information.

Thank you for connecting with IDVA.

Sincerely,
Terry Prince

IDVA Director

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.

Breast Cancer Awareness



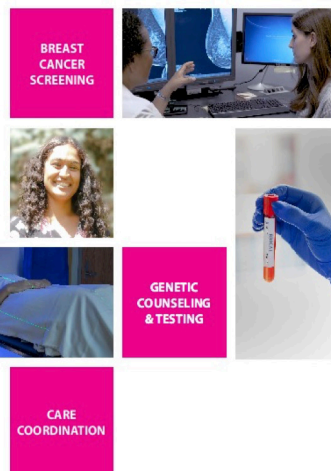
About one in eight women will develop invasive breast cancer in her lifetime, a tragic reality too many women come to face. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs acknowledges that there have been individual reports of breast cancer diagnoses among post-9/11 women Veterans which they are following closely. To read more on this, please visit [VA's Public Health-Military Exposures & Your Health-2022- Issue 6](#).

For women veterans eligible for VA Healthcare, reach out to your Women's Health provider today to schedule a screening.

For those not eligible for VA Healthcare, please consider reaching out to your healthcare provider to set up a time for a screening or visit the [Illinois Department of Public Health's website](#) to learn more about your options for breast exams and mammograms or call the Women's Health-Line at 888-522-1282 (TTY 800-547-0466).

Concerned about your breast cancer risk?

VA offers state-of-the-art breast care.



CANCER TREATMENT



GENETIC COUNSELING & TESTING



Talk to your Women's Health provider today.

CARE COORDINATION

Women Veterans Call Center: 1-855-829-6636
www.womenshealth.va.gov | #WomenVets



IDVA Pink Out Day

In honor of the millions of women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer, IDVA staff participated in a department-wide "Pink Out Day" to show support for the women across the world who have or are actively battling breast cancer.



Chicago and Springfield offices show their support of Breast Cancer Awareness Month.



Team IDVA at the Veterans' Home at Anna.



Team IDVA at the Chicago home



Women Veterans

Preventative Wellness

Take time to take care of yourself. Check out the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recommended Preventive Health Checklist for Women.

PREVENTIVE HEALTH CHECKLIST FOR WOMEN

	Service	My Age						How Often?
		20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s +	
SCREENING TESTS	Pap tests for cervical cancer	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		Every 3 to 5 years
	Mammograms for breast cancer			✓	✓	✓	✓	Every 1 to 2 years
	Lung cancer screenings for smokers				✓	✓	✓	Ask your provider
	Colonoscopies for colon cancer			✓	✓	✓	✓	Every 5 to 10 years
	DEXA scans for bone density					✓	✓	Once
	Mental health	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Every year
	Sexually transmitted infections	✓						Ask your provider
VACCINES	HPV	✓						Once (2-3 doses)
	Flu	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Every year
	COVID-19	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Ask your provider
	Shingles				✓	✓	✓	Once (2-3 doses)
	Pneumonia					✓	✓	Once
	Tetanus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Every 5-10 years; or when pregnant
WHOLE HEALTH & WELLNESS	Tobacco use counseling and help quitting	Recommended for everyone who smokes						Smokers - every checkup
	Healthy alcohol use counseling	Recommended for everyone who drinks alcohol						Every checkup or as needed
	Diet and exercise support	Recommended for everyone						Every checkup or as needed
	Health checkups and lab tests	Recommended for everyone						Ask your provider

Work with your primary care provider to create a prevention plan designed for you. For questions about women's health services or to get connected with your local VA, call or text the Women Veterans Call Center at 855-829-6636.

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

IB-10-1682 P97119 JULY 2022 10W



Monthly Highlights

Gold Star Families

Gold Star Families connected for the first in-person Gold Star Families weekend in three years, which included two-days of programs, events, and gatherings. The families connected, shared stories and honored their hero through tears and laughter. The weekend concluded with the Yellow Rose ceremony, a somber remembrance of the sacrifices of the hero and their family.



Director Prince welcomes Gold Star Families to the Friday evening Relaxation Room at the Crowne Plaza in Springfield.



Pictured from left to right: Tom Bickers, Gary Patriquin, Crystal Womack, Connie Bickers, and Marley Fank.



Families enjoyed an evening of Sip and Paint where they crafted holiday ornaments. Pictured from left to right: Joanne Staral, Gay Eisenhauer, and Seeley Smith.



A Scavenger Hunt sent the families around Springfield unraveling their clues. Pictured: Seeley Smith, Joanne Staral and Nancy Ebbers



Sunday's Mother's Day program culminated the weekend by honoring the families' heroes. Governor JB Pritzker, Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton, IDVA Director Terry Prince spoke along with keynote speaker Brigadier General (Retired) Alicia Tate-Nadeau, Director, Illinois Emergency Management Agency.



Monthly Highlights

Hispanic Heritage Month



Hispanic Americans' contributions to the nation are immeasurable, and they embody the best of our values. The Hispanic American community has left an indelible mark on the military, our culture and the economy. Today, more

than 16 percent of our Armed Forces are Hispanic. We honor and are grateful for Hispanic veterans and those currently serving. We also thank IDVA employees of Hispanic Heritage for their service and continued work supporting veterans throughout Illinois. #HispanicHeritageMonth2022

Melissa Beckford, North Region Supervisor, was featured on CMS' social media platforms for Hispanic Heritage Month. [Click here to view.](#)



Employment

Director Prince joined employers and veteran service organizations for: **A Call to Lead: Empowering Chicago's Employers on the Search for Top Military-Connected Talent - a joint session of the Chicago Vets Working Group and the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes Community Engagement Series.** Director Prince spoke about the challenges service members face, not only translating their skills to civilian life, but with employers understanding and recognizing the competencies a veteran brings to the workplace as well.

The half-day event held at the Chicago Club highlighted the Chicago military community and its value to the region; provided best practices for businesses to find, hire and retain military connected talent in and to the region; and provided an opportunity to find innovative solutions to meet the workforce challenges in the Chicago area and create connection points for national

and regional veteran and military spouse non-profits. It was attended by employer representatives including human resources leadership, talent acquisition specialists, and hiring managers—to academia, associations, veteran service organizations, federal and state officials, and advocates.



It was an inspiring afternoon to connect around the important topic of veteran employment. For veterans seeking employment, visit: <https://ides.illinois.gov/jobs-workforce/veterans.html>.

Employment

Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs is Hiring

The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs five skilled residential homes are hiring for full and part time LPN, RNs, CNAs, and dietary staff. Come join a team serving those who served.

VETERANS' HOMES STATEWIDE ARE HIRING

CNA - Veterans Nursing Assistant - Certified, Food Service, Housekeeping, and More!

Anna Veterans' Home 618-202-6012 – Human Resources

Chicago Veterans' Home 773-824-3877 – Human Resources

LaSalle Veterans' Home 815-410-8391 – Human Resources

Manteno Veterans' Home 815-907-3530 – Human Resources

Quincy Veterans' Home 217-640-2480 – Human Resources

For job postings, visit:
Careers at State of Illinois (work.illinois.gov)



IDOT Encourages Veterans to Apply for Snowbird Program

The Illinois Department of Transportation is gearing up for winter weather by hiring seasonal help for snow-and-ice removal across the state, and veterans are encouraged to apply. This year, IDOT plans to hire both Snow Removal Operators and Winter Salaried Highway Maintainers to help maintain more than 45,000 lane miles statewide during the winter season.

Through the department's annual "snowbird" program, the temporary employees are hired on a full-time and on-call basis.

Last year, a new law signed by Governor JB Pritzker extended the state's veteran preference laws to include these seasonal highway maintainer positions at IDOT. Veterans who apply will be given special consideration, but final selection will be based on availability, job-related experience and qualifications.

"Snowbirds are a critical part of our efforts to clear roads and keep Illinois moving during snow-and-ice season, and our tried-and-true veterans are perfect for the job," said Illinois Transportation Secretary Omer

Osman. "As snowbirds, they will ensure safe travel for residents, while earning extra money during the winter months."

Snowbirds are required to promptly respond to emerging weather situations for snow-and-ice removal and be prepared to work in emergency conditions at any time, including nights, weekends and holidays. Applicants must have a commercial driver's license and submit to a criminal background check. A pre-employment physical, vision testing, and drug and alcohol screening also are required.

For additional information, including details on pay and the potential for benefits, please click [here](#). You may also contact the Veterans Outreach Program for more information at 217-524-1313 or 800-643-8138.

For job postings throughout the state, visit: <https://illinois.jobs2web.com>.

Article contributed by the Illinois Department of Transportation

Resources

Veterans - Be Aware of Scammers!

Visit <https://news.va.gov/107732/be-vigilant-of-pact-act-scammers/>

Scammers are taking advantage of new opportunities to commit fraud. There's been an increase in PACT Act-related [phishing \(email\)](#), vishing (phone), and [social media scams](#) targeting Veterans to access their PACT Act benefits or submit claims on their behalf.

Veterans should be cautious of anyone who guarantees a lucrative financial benefit or service. To report suspected fraudulent activity, please contact vaoigho-tline@va.gov or call (800) 488-8244.

Protect yourself against new scams and scammers with these tips:

- Do not provide personal, benefits, medical, or financial details online or over the phone. Federal agencies will not contact you unless you make a request.
- Do not click on online ads or engage with social media that seem suspicious.
- Check for "https://" at the start of website addresses.
- Enable multi-factor authentication on all accounts.
- Work with Veteran service providers you already know.
- Submit any suspected fraud to [ftc.gov](https://www.ftc.gov).

Field Services

Note from Mark Patterson, Field Services Manager

We had a good month in September. Three of our recently hired Veterans Service Officers, Tina Griffiths (Franklin Co., Benton), Mark Robinson (Peoria Co., Peoria) and Doug Figge (Madison Co., Edwardsville), completed their course work and testing for accreditation. We wish them the best of success in representing their fellow veterans, and dependents. On that note, we have two additional Veterans Service Officers joining the mission. Please welcome Anthony Harrison (Sangamon Co., Springfield) and Michael Willis (Cook Co., Southeast) who joined IDVA on October 1.

One of our current Veterans Service Officers, Kimberly Fuiten, will be starting in her new role as Central Region Supervisor. Kimberly had been in a temporary assignment in that role and is hitting the ground running. Welcome to the leadership team, Kim.

We also had the pleasure to participate in the Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commission's September Educational Conference. Ten staff, consisting of supervisors and VSOs attended. The conference

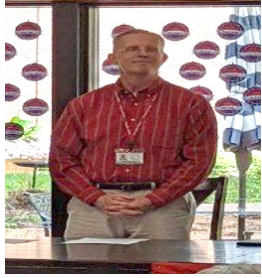
was informative and complimented the training that we had in the Spring. We are planning additional collaborative training events. Thank you IACVAC leadership and members for the training and hospitality.



VSOs attend the IACVAC Banquet on September 22, 2022

Pictured from left to right: back row: Debbie Fuehrer (VSO), Carla Waibel (VSO), Robert Iverson (Claims Management/Acting), Director Prince middle row: Tina Paggi (VSO), Mark Patterson (Field Services Manager), Melissa Beckford (Northern Region Supervisor), Kimberly Fuiten, Central Region Supervisor/Acting), Anthony Hernandez (VSO) Front row: Ken Bonner (Field Training Coordinator), and Jeffrey Lewis (Southern Region Supervisor/Acting).

Field Services



Matt Taylor, Winnebago County IDVA VSO serving ten years, was a panelist for the Independence Village Rockford "815" event where the home honored its veteran residents. Matt participated in the panel discussion and spent time with veterans and surviving

spouses discussing the VBA pension program.

"These kinds of events give us an opportunity to reach sheltered communities, such as senior homes to help them apply for VA benefits and the VBA pension program," said Matt, a Marine Corps Veteran. "Outreach through events helps build and maintain relationships so that we can serve more and more veterans and their dependents."



Melissa Downey

Melissa Downey, VSO, was featured in the Northwest Herald September 17th edition, "William Chandler Peterson American Legion Post 171 special feature 'What Does a Woman Veteran Look Like?' written by Sue Dobbe-Leahy and photos by K-Adams Foto." This article is published with permission.



MELISSA DOWNEY

Branch: Army National Guard,
1993 - Present

Rank: CW3

Home: Lake in the Hills



After a visit to Washington D.C. where she saw a Gulf War "welcome home" celebration, Melissa was inspired to join the military. That encounter, coupled with the realization that the college funds provided in exchange for her service would be helpful, fueled her to enlist in the Army National Guard.

Once she turned 17, she tried to enlist, but due to a heart condition at birth she was delayed until December 1993, when she swore her oath at the Chicago Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). She graduated from high school in 1994 and headed to Army Basic Training at Ft. Jackson, S.C.

Melissa was deployed for 19 months to Kuwait and Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003-04, spending more than 15 months in theater.

In 2010-11, she was activated as rear support for her unit for Operation New Dawn. She was deployed to Kuwait again in 2014 under the Global War on Terrorism. She also participated in Operation Saber Strike in 2018 in Poland.

On the home front, she was activated for the Red River Floods in 1995 in North Dakota, as well as 2008 to southern Illinois.

During her nearly 30 years of service, she has been in the Army National Guard in two states; been part of

six different brigades; and completed five leadership schools – including Warrant Officer Candidate School at the age of 39.

Today, Melissa is the senior food service advisor to brigade leadership. She also works for the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs as a Veteran Service Officer, helping veterans, dependents and surviving family members apply for benefits.

She also has been a Victim Advocate since 2008 and an on-call volunteer for the SHARP program (Sexual Harassment Assault Response Program).

Melissa, a single mother to her 17-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son, has an associate degree from McHenry County College; a bachelor's degree from Columbia College of Missouri; and a master's degree in counseling from Northern Illinois University.

She volunteers with Veterans R&R Operation Wild Horse in Bull Valley; fosters dogs with the Animal House Shelter in Huntley; and with her children, serves at the Lake in the Hills Food Pantry. In her spare time, she loves to play softball.

One of her favorite quotes is from Colin Powell: "A dream does not become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination and hard work."



Veterans' Homes



Ashley Benitez, support service for dietary in the Veterans' Home at Chicago, bakes homemade birthday cakes for each of the home's residents. Her custom baked and decorated cakes are an expression of her deep appreciation of veterans. She draws on her own creativity to design cakes that reflect the individual interests and personalities of the veteran celebrating his or her birthday.

"Ashley has been with the Chicago home for over a year," said Home Administrator T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson. "We are grateful for her gesture of baking cakes for veterans, which makes them feel special and at home."



Two busses of residents from the Veterans' Home at Anna giddy upped for private dining at the Golden Corral.



The Veterans' Ranch at Chicago hosted a birthday hoe down!



Going for the Gold: This Special Olympics Regional Bocce ball team are qualifiers for the State Championship in Jefferson City, MO.



News from the Capitol



IDVA's Legislative Division is responsible for drafting, reviewing and monitoring legislation. However, it is also responsible for constituent cases and inquiries. Constituent cases and inquiries typically come from two places: the Governor's Office of Constituent Affairs (GOCA) or legislative district offices.

Over the last seven months there have been 116 constituent cases. That is approximately 16 cases a month. Often, the cases pertain to veterans' benefits and claims. In fact, of the 116 cases, 86 pertained to veterans' benefits and claims. That is 74 percent! With these cases, IDVA's legislative division simply forwards them to the applicable veteran service officer (VSO) for the area. Yet sometimes the cases do not pertain to veterans' benefits and claims. With these cases, IDVA's

legislative division connects the constituent or district office to the most applicable resource. That can mean providing contact information for a veteran service organization, federal VA, or another agency in state government.

Over the last few months, there have been some wonderful stories from constituent cases. IDVA staff have helped recognize individual veterans, have helped veterans and their families navigate the state veterans' home application process, supported resource fairs and events, and more.

Stay tuned, as *Veterans Connections* will be featuring more of these stories in upcoming editions!

Team IDVA



Building on the Governor's promise to hire individuals with strong backgrounds and expertise who can bring best practices to our Agency, Director Prince announced the arrival of two new employees:

Renysa Brown, Lieutenant Colonel, USA (Retired) will serve as the Veterans Accountability Unit (VAU) Director. LTC Brown was recently appointed by Governor JB Pritzker as the first to serve in this newly created position. She continues her state service after her most recent assignment at the Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) where she served as a Division Chief since 2019. Prior to that, she worked as a Bureau Chief at the Illinois Department of Human Services following her work as the Chief of Staff at IDVA. LTC Brown is a combat veteran of two conflicts having served in the United States Army and Illinois Army National Guard where she holds the distinction of commanding the largest battalion in the Illinois Army National Guard. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Fashion Merchandising from Western Illinois University and a Master of Arts in Procurement and Acquisitions Management from Webster University. LTC Brown and the VAU will operate independently of the IDVA to assess and report complaints, allegations and possible cases of misconduct to the Office of the Inspector General for the agencies of the Illinois Governor. Based

out of the Springfield IDVA Headquarters Annex, she can be reached at (217) 558-8361 or Renysa.brown@illinois.gov. Soon, the VAU will publish a toll-free help-line and dedicated email address to receive complaints, information and recommendations.

Teresa Smoot joins the leadership team of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs as the co-Labor Relations Administrator for IDVA and will work side by side with the current Labor Relations Administrator, Lisa Tisdale, in that role. She joins us at a critical time in our organization as we continue to work through implementation of the 6-point plan for the future of IDVA. Prior to joining IDVA, Teresa served as the Senior Relations Specialist/Employee Relations at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine where she was the Chief Spokesperson for collective bargaining and assisted in employee recruitment and retention. Before that, she served as the Labor Representative for the Policemen's Benevolent Labor Committee. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science/Legal Studies from the University of Illinois-Springfield and an Associate's Degree in Business Administration from Illinois Central College in East Peoria, Illinois. Based out of our Springfield Headquarters Annex, she can be reached at (217) 558-8362 or teresa.smoot@illinois.gov.

Interested in Becoming a State of Illinois Vendor?

If you are interested in becoming a vendor with the State of Illinois, please join the 2022 State of Illinois Vendor Summit on November 10th or visit: [BidBuy \(illinois.gov\)](https://www.bidbuy.illinois.gov) to learn about this eProcurement System that fosters a more efficient and effective partnership.

Interested in doing business with the State of Illinois? If so, please follow the links below to register your business.

Sell 2 Illinois

<https://www2.illinois.gov/cms/business/sell2/Pages/default.aspx>

Illinois Procurement Gateway

<https://ipg.vendorreg.com/>

BidBuy

<https://www.bidbuy.illinois.gov/bsa/view/login/login.xhtml>

Pathway to Procurement

<https://www2.illinois.gov/cpo/PathwayToProcurement/Pages/Guides-and-Manuals.aspx>

Are you a minority, woman, and/or persons with disabilities owned business?

<https://www2.illinois.gov/cms/business/sell2/bep/Pages/Certification.aspx>

A promotional poster for the 2022 State of Illinois Vendor Summit. The background is dark blue with faint silhouettes of a construction worker on the left and a woman on the right. The central text is white and bold. The top half of the poster features the year '2022' in large font, followed by 'STATE OF ILLINOIS' in smaller font, and 'VENDOR SUMMIT' in large font. Below this, the date 'November 10, 2022' is displayed in a large, bold font. Underneath the date, the location 'Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum | Springfield, Illinois' is written in a smaller font. The bottom section of the poster contains the text 'Learn How to Do Business with the State of Illinois' and 'Come out and grow your network!' in bold, followed by the website 'www.illinois.gov/vendorsummit' in a bold font.

2022
STATE OF ILLINOIS
**VENDOR
SUMMIT**

November 10, 2022

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum | Springfield, Illinois

Learn How to Do Business with the State of Illinois
Come out and grow your network!

www.illinois.gov/vendorsummit

Fort Sheridan

Fort Sheridan, an active U.S. Army post from 1887-1993, is now the site of Lake Country Forest Preserves open to the public for recreation, and the residential neighborhood of Fort Sheridan.

Fort Sheridan was named for General Philip H. Sheridan and his role in restoring order after the Chicago Fire of October 8, 1871. The first infantry companies arrived in 1887 under the command of Major William J. Lyster. The 632 acres of Fort Sheridan were constructed with intentional architectural components to align with the landscape of rolling hills, ravines, and native plants. More than 65 masonry buildings were constructed including a water tower built in 1891, which remains a landmark today.

Over the course of its more than 100 years, Fort Sheridan served as a recruiting, induction, training, and transit center. Its landscape facilitated infantry and cavalry training, and ammunition could safely be fired over the shores of Lake Michigan. At its peak in 1975, 5,000 military personnel were stationed at the Fort, which was officially closed on May 38, 1993.

Today, residential homes sit on the Fort's original land and the Fort Sheridan Forest Preserve includes many

biking and walking trails, and a Birding Trail Loop for birdwatching enthusiasts. Several outdoor exhibits explaining Fort Sheridan's history are dispersed along the trail.

The Fort Sheridan National Cemetery with gravestones dating back to 1890 is the final resting place for 2,000 service members serving in the Civil War, Philippine Insurrection, World War I, World War II, Korean War, and the Vietnam War. It is operated by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Dunn Museum Collections display dozens of artifacts and nearly 3,000 photographs of Fort Sheridan for public viewing at the Bess Bower Dunn Museum in Libertyville or through the Illinois Digital Archives to preserve the history of the base and its contributions to the nation's military.

If visiting the area, one can find at least eight other Sources cited and for more information, visit:

- <https://www.lcpd.org/fort-sheridan/>
- <https://www.cem.va.gov/cems/nchp/FtSheridan.asp>
- <http://www.fortsheridan.com/>

photo-<https://www.lcpd.org/fort-sheridan/>



Illinois Department of
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