



VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 4, Issue 5 ★ May 2024

★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince



Memorial Day, while the unofficial kick-off to the summer season is for many veterans and families, is a time of deep reflection in remembrance of those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. I was honored to spend the holiday with the people of the Village of Mount Prospect and participate in their Memorial Day Parade. It was an impressive display of support--and the community, like many across Illinois, showed up in force to demonstrate their appreciation for the freedoms we all enjoy. I was moved to see people of all ages waving flags and taking part in the parade. What an incredible way to honor the fallen and witness their love for our military.

One of the best ways to honor the fallen is to share their stories. One soldier whose story will continue is Private First Class Harry Jerele of Berkely, Illinois. Several weeks ago, Illinois learned that PFC Jerele was finally coming home after losing his life at the Cabanatuan POW Camp in December 1942. Jerele was among the 2,500 POWs who perished in this camp during World War II. Earlier that year, PFC Jerele was a member of the 192nd Tank Battalion when Japanese forces invaded the Philippine Islands. Sadly, thousands of U.S. and Filipino service members were captured and sent to POW camps. PFC Jerele was captured when U.S. forces in Bataan surrendered to the Japanese and were forced to walk the infamous 65-mile Bataan Death March. PFC Jerele was buried in the local Cabanatuan Camp Cemetery in Common Grave 804.

The remains of those buried in Common Grave 804 were exhumed in 1947, however, his remains were not immediately identifiable. In 2020, the remains were sent for extensive examination through the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System and were identified using DNA analysis. PFC Jerele will be buried at the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Cemetery on October 6, 2024.

This is an important story as it demonstrates the respect our nation holds toward those who have served and for those who lost their lives to protect freedoms around the globe. Our country honored his service and sacrifice through its commitment to bringing him home to his final resting place. I hope you will take a moment to reflect on his journey and live a life that is worthy of his sacrifice.

This month's edition also highlights many of the great things happening across our state. You will learn about an extraordinary student veteran, IDVA's nurses, VSOs, legislative news, and other veteran service organizations. Throughout the summer, please look for our VSOs at local fairs and community events. They are there to help!

As always, thank you for your service and for staying connected to IDVA.

Sincerely,

Terry Prince

U.S. Navy Veteran and IDVA Director



2024 Student Veteran Leader of the Year



left to right: IDVA Veterans Education and Training Service Administrator and Military Order of the Purple Heart Dan Wellman, recipient Michael Jacobson, Dr. Mia Garcia-Hills, Director of Student Veterans Office, and IDVA Director Terry Prince.

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) and the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH) presented the 2024 Illinois Student Veteran of the Year Award to U.S. Marine Corps veteran Michael Jacobson, Mechatronics, Robotics, and Automation Engineering PhD candidate at the University of Illinois Chicago. Michael also earned his B.S. in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Michael served five years in the U.S. Marine Corps including conducting counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan under Operation Enduring Freedom. He was recognized for exemplary service with the Good Conduct Medal and Combat Action Ribbon.

In nominating Michael, Dr. Mia Garcia-Hills, Director of the Student Veterans Affairs Office of the Dean of Students, pointed to his involvement with the UIC's Student Veterans Center, mentorship of undergraduate students, and his innovative approach to his studies.

As a student veteran, Michael volunteered with Breaking the Chains, a rescue team that extracts animals of all types to safety from dangerous conditions worldwide. Michael's mission was in Ukraine where he participated in saving animals abandoned because of the war. As a PhD candidate, he researches machine learning and has developed prototypes of robotic prosthetics designed to support persons with critical injuries.

Michael was selected among an impressive pool of student veteran candidates who demonstrate a strong engagement with their college/university and/or the wider community. Recipients portray leadership characteristics and excellence in academics. They serve as role models for the student veteran body by volunteering, participating in events, academic achievement, reaching out to fellow student veterans, and portraying an overall positive attitude. This is the fifth year the award has been presented.

The award ceremony was held on May 14th on the UIC campus where Dr. Marie Lyn Miranda, Chancellor of UIC commended Michael for his accomplishments and contributions to the university's student veteran community. Director Terry Prince also congratulated Michael for his achievements and recognized student veterans' contributions in the classroom and on campus. Dan Wellman presented the award on behalf of IDVA and the Military Order of the Purple Heart. Also attending was Rogelio Villa, representing Senator Tammy Duckworth and Chicago Alderman Bill Conway.

Field Services

Field services conducted its annual training conference this month in Springfield where Veteran Service Officers and staff gather to discuss best practices, share experiences, and learn new information regarding benefits and services. An important part of the conference is to recognize team members' dedication, education, and excellence that are incredible and noteworthy. This year we had the privilege to present the following individuals:

5 years of service

Chad Roach (Macoupin County)
Claudia Bautista (Claims Management Center)
Dax Griffith (Jackson County)
Michael Jay (Winnebago County)

10 years of service

Chuck Bosko (Claims Management Center)
Jeff Eagler (Macon County)
Ken Bonner (Training Coordinator)

30 years of service

Lauralee Treece (Morgan County)

Veterans Service Officer of the Quarter

1st Qtr: **Josh Layton** (Southern Region)
 2nd Qtr: **Shynaë Murphy** (Metro Region)
 3rd Qtr: **Jeff Eagler** (Central Region)
 4th Qtr: **Matthew Taylor** (Northern Region)



Left to right: Director Prince, Lauralee Treece, Ken Bonner, Jeff Eagler, Chuck Bosko, Dax Griffith, Claudia Bautista, Michael Jay, and Chad Roach.

Presentation of Accreditation from the US Department of Veterans Affairs Office of General Counsel:

Alfredo Rocha
 Amos Griffin
 Anthony Harris
 Anthony Krajefski
 Bradley Gaylord
 Gerald Enriquez
 Jordan Heap
 Mark Robinson
 Matthew Allen
 Michael Willis
 Michele Hansen-Hoback
 Tina Griffiths



Officer Iftexhar South Elgin Police Department, Frank Delatorre, IDVA VSO, and Mavilen Silva Chief of Staff, for Senator Christina Castro 22nd District attend the Senior Health and Wellness Fair at Elgin Community College.



IDVA was well represented at the Cook County Department of Corrections Mental Health Awareness Day. From left to right: Alfonso Lopez, Veterans Outreach Specialist, Chicago Vet Center, IDVA VSO Anthony Hernandez (Chicago), Oneta Sampson, Special Assistant to Executive Director Cook County Department of Corrections, IDVA Metro Region Supervisor Robert Iverson, IDVA Senior Program Manager/Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson, and Lisa Mendez, Communications Specialist Outreach Coordinator.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Volunteer Fair



Administrative Assistant Rose Ann Winkel, Administrator Tanya Smith, Volunteer Coordinator Becky Wilder, and volunteer Nancy Jurevich.

As part of National Volunteer Week, The Illinois Veterans' Home at Manteno hosted IDVA's first-ever volunteer fair Operation Camaraderie to recruit volunteers for the Home. Since COVID-19, the Illinois Veterans' Homes across the state have lost many volunteers. Across the nation, volunteers have dropped seven percent, from 30 to 23 percent, between 2019-2021. The Homes, because of COVID-19 and mandated restrictions, experienced an even greater decline in volunteerism. Building back IDVA's volunteer base is critical to providing important services and opportunities for residents in its care.

IDVA invited veteran service providers, student veterans, community colleges, churches, local organizations, and individuals to learn more about volunteer opportunities. Participants learned from current volunteers about their experiences including woodworking, transportation, fishing, and others. Local food truck Zarates Tacos offered lunch for participants and IDVA staff.



Volunteer fishermen Ken Kros, (left) and Bob Huges with Volunteer Coordinator Becky Wilder.

"The Veterans' Home at Manteno's volunteers were convincing as they shared the meaningful work they do with veterans," said IDVA Director Terry Prince. "As a pilot program, Operation Camaraderie successfully recruited volunteers, and we look forward to hosting fairs at IDVA's other four homes across the state."



Director Terry Prince visits with volunteers Sandy Britt and Maggie Davis at the woodworking table.

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
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/>.

IDVA ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Illinois has a new FY25 budget as it was passed by the General Assembly before it adjourned on May 24th. IDVA...

In last month's update, information was shared on HB 4757, SB 3479, HB 612, and SB 2769. [HB 4757](#) authorizes a veterans' benefits poster. It passed both chambers and awaits the Governor's signature. [SB 3479](#) puts more protections into law to combat claim sharks. It passed out of its House committee and awaits a vote on the House floor. [HB 612](#), the veteran's property tax bill, continues to make its way through the legislative process. [SB 2769](#), the veterans' internship pilot, is stalled in the House.

Additional legislation has been added in May.

[SB 2597 \(Turner/Weaver\)](#): SB 2597 amends the Electric Vehicle Charging Act. It provides that electric vehicle requirements in the Act do not apply to any non-profit organization, a 501c(3) or 501 c(19), that exclusively funds and constructs tiny homes for homeless veterans or veterans at risk of homelessness. It also provides that counties and municipalities cannot adopt building codes or ordinances requiring EV-capable parking spaces for these particular homes. This bill has an immediate effective date.

[SB 2778 \(Holmes/Moylan\)](#): SB 2778 amends the Counties Code. It provides that a deputy sheriff applicant who is a veteran, who was discharged honorably or generally under honorable conditions no later than six months before applying, may be examined as soon as possible prior to the next examination date, if requested. It also provides that the veteran shall immediately be placed on the eligibility list following a passed examination and meeting other eligibility requirements. Finally, it provides that this expedited process shall work in conjunction with military preference points.

[HB 5596 \(Benton/Hastings\)](#): HB 5596 amends the Child Care Act of 1969. It provides that a day care home or group day care home is not required to be licensed under the Act if the home: (1) serves dependent children of military personnel; (2) is located on a military base or federal or government property; and (3) is certified as a child development program by a branch of the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. Coast Guard. It provides that the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. Coast Guard, or their agents, may assume responsibility for approving or determining which children may be served by the daycare homes or group daycare homes that are exempt from licensure.



The Veterans' Home at Anna celebrated 17 employees with 20 or more years of service in a wide range of capacities in the home. Director Terry Prince visited the Home to personally congratulate their service to Illinois veterans in IDVA's care.

Front row: left to right: Shelley Ellis, VNAC to Storekeeper III, Amy McDuffee, LPN, Bonnie Cast, VNAC, Tonia Sherwood, VNAC to Lead Housekeeper, Bonnie Brimm, VNAC to Physical Therapy Aide, Deb Dillon, Accountant Advanced, Melissa Tripp, VNAC, Amy Keistler, Administrator

Second row: left to right: Rich Tripp: VNAC to Physical Therapy Aide, Anna Aumiller, VNAC to Laundry to Account Tech II, Rose Williams, VNAC, Barb Doublin, Cook I, Director Terry Prince, Anita Prate, RN II, Missy Smith, RN II, and Skira Harper, VNAC.

Not pictured: Amy Shepard, SSW, Rose Reeves, Security Officer, Denise Goins, Librarian to HR to Account Tech II to Advanced Accountant, and Marilyn Land, VNAC

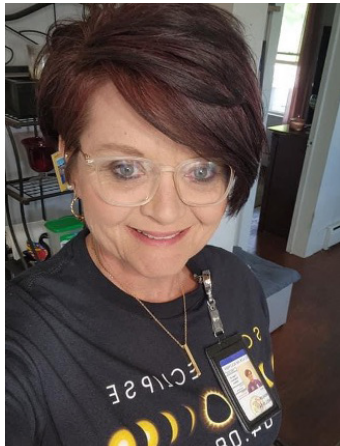
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ National Nurse's Week

Illinois veterans residing at the Illinois Veterans' Homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy are cared for by highly professional nurses who deliver care with compassion and warmth. Their dedication allows us to honor our promise to care for the whole person, and the veterans' medical needs are central to their well-being. Thank you for all you do to elevate the quality of life for veterans in our care.

Veterans' Home at Anna



Missy Smith



Melissa Waun



Shelly Miller, Lori Godwin, Trisha Cobb, Anita Prater, Layla Malone, Robin Leaton and Amy McDuffee, Not pictured: Emily Sherwood, Kristi Fombelle, Sue Randolph, Cathy Furlow, Mary Moore, Karen Tripp, Ellen Strothmann, Cali Basler, Cathy Chamness and Heather Stanley

Veterans' Home at Chicago



Shiny Machanickal & Dr. Denise King



Left to right: Ann Thottichira, Juby Mathew, Bhoomi Patel, Maria Doruelo, Dr. Denise King, Jennifer Malone, Ana Cabaluna, Ann Thampi, Thankamma Kuriakose



Dr. Denise King & Ethel Verdad

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ National Nurse's Week

Veterans' Home at LaSalle



Vicki Mead, Cynthia Pettit, Marcus Regan



Eva Ambler, Amanda Harris, Laura Benoit



Ashley Spanos, Hillary Williams

Veterans' Home at Manteno



Angela Sartore, Tim Splear, Marcy Koenig, Elisha Vasquez



Center: Diane Hunter; Left to Right: Jessica Arseneau, Brandy Sims, Vicki Green-Gibbs, Ericka Gholston



*Left to right: MeLinda Marrs Infection Prevention
Tamara Lippelt Nurse Educator*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ National Nurse's Week

Veterans' Home at Quincy



left to right: Brandy Cottrell, LPN, Kelsey Terwelp, RN, Angie Clark, RN, Jen Cassens – Nursing Supervisor, Fifer, Dawn Alexander, LPN, Christelle Stewart, LPN



left to right: Alexis White, VNAC, Martha Ellefritz, VNAC, Michelle Daugherty – Nursing Supervisor, Jessica Campbell, RN, Alimatou Moussa, LPN



Left to right: Amanda Hubner – Nurse Practitioner, Sylvia Brock, LPN, Amy Green – Nursing Supervisor, Markword 1



left to right: Robin Sonethongkham, RN, Heidi Ludwig, Nurse Practitioner, Lora Stolte, RN – MDS, Tracy Ford, RN – Wound Specialist, Judith Macfarlane, RN, Elebade Akakpo-Lado, RN, Cheryl Howard, LPN, Tracy Alexander – Nursing Supervisor



Left to right: Julia Togarepi – Director of Nursing, Brad Florea - In-Service Coordinator/Employee Health Nurse, Tammy Sullivan – Nursing Supervisor, Schapers, Lindsey Kelley – Infection Control, Amanda Tournear – EHR/MDS (Electronic Health Records/ Minimum Data Set), Lynn Dingerson – Psych Nurse



left to right: Sarah Starr, VNAC, Tori Dameron, RN, Tammy Sullivan, Nursing Supervisor, Schapers, Jennifer Hudelson, VNAC, Dana Mehochko, VNAC, Haley Pate, VNAC, Shelby Hilgenbrinck, VNAC, Kelsey Miller, VNAC



Veterans' Home at Quincy Time Capsule

On April 11, 1987, as part of the Veterans' Home at Quincy's Centennial Celebration, a time capsule was buried on the Boulevard. To continue with the construction of a roundabout related to the Home's \$280 million construction project, the time capsule was excavated for the first time in 37 years by the construction crew. The metal box was safely encased in a cement pedestal which the crew carefully jackhammered to free it from the concrete. It was given to Security Chief Mark Iseminger for safekeeping.

When construction of the roundabout is nearing completion, the time capsule will be buried for another 62 years, and unearthed on the 200th anniversary of the Home.



The construction crew unearths the time capsule.

IVHQ Staff

Was caught being awesome by Valerie Peterson for showing up and representing the Quincy Veterans Home in the Dogwood Parade! From those who cleaned the wagon (including snake removal), created the float, provided and drove vehicles, purchased candy to throw to the crowd, walked, carried banners and proudly carried all the flags - I think you're AWESOME! We won the Mayor's Award and trophy thanks to all of you!



Dog Tag Entrepreneurial Fellowship Program



This article was submitted by Dog Tag Entrepreneurial Fellowship and published with permission.

The [Dog Tag Entrepreneurial Fellowship Program](#) equips veterans, military spouses, and caregivers with the tools and education to build resilience, find renewed purpose, and forge community beyond the military. Dog Tag provides a transitional bridge from military service to the civilian world and acts as a catalyst for finding direction and moving forward.

Dog Tag Fellows earn a business certificate from Loyola University Chicago and bring their coursework to life by learning the ins and outs of running a successful business at Dog Tag Bakery. Fellows build community with each other and enhance their well-being by committing time to introspection, storytelling, and personal growth.

Our fellows see and value themselves differently after they graduate and continue on their own journeys with greater confidence, resilience, and direction—an achievement described by many as nothing short of life-changing.

Chicago Cohort 5 recently graduated. Here are some of their reflections on the program:

- I learned that your business strategy can be centered around core values and principles. Dog Tag em“barks” on that (pun intended) philosophy. I learned that the world of business doesn’t have to be so one sided (making money). Especially in a field where you provide a service to PEOPLE and where PEOPLE are your roots, its ok to place profits secondary, allowing SERVICE to take the #1 spot. - Air Force Veteran

- I’ve learned that all you ever needed was a voice and to always put my best foot forward. I am glad I took on this challenge to PUSH my limits, OWN my story and HELP others along the way. - Army Veteran
- Every day the vision for my business grows because of the guidance from my instructors and fellows. I know by the end of my fellowship I will be ready to take the next steps in my business and have a wonderful support network! - Army Spouse

Named after the identification tag worn by all members of all branches of the military, Dog Tag embraces the unifying symbol of honor and remembrance for those, past and present, who have served courageously and selflessly.

Both a thriving bakery and an immersive classroom, Dog Tag provides a supportive and holistic learning environment where our fellows are challenged to apply their knowledge to a real-world business. The fellowship also includes wellness and traditional business school components to facilitate the full spectrum of transition into both entrepreneurship and civilian life.

Beginning with an initial class of 10 Fellows in 2014, Dog Tag now has a thriving alumni network of over 300 Fellows and empowers about 60 new Fellows every year. What differentiates the Dog Tag Fellowship Program is a combination of resilience-focused curriculum, high-touch community-building, and powerful experiential learning through apprentice-style training.

The fellowship runs for 5 months twice a year starting in January and July. The full time, hybrid program includes a stipend to offset costs, fellows are supplied with a laptop, and the program does not utilize the G.I. Bill. Equality, access, and diversity are essential to the program.

Dave Pedersen, a third-generation Army veteran, and Chicago Cohort 2 graduate, never imagined he’d open an independent bookstore in downtown Rockford, Illinois, where he grew up. But with the help of his wife, Pedersen opened [Maze Books](#) in June 2022.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Dog Tag Entrepreneurial Fellowship Program

Pedersen credits his participation in [Dog Tag's five-month fellowship program](#) with allowing him to take the plunge and open the bookstore. Dog Tag CEO Meghan Ogilvie explains, "Success is defined by the individual. Dog Tag is there to meet them where they are and support them through it."

When Pedersen attended Dog Tag's fellowship program in early 2022, the program delved into forming an LLC, hiring an accountant, getting business insurance, and dealing with inventory, sales, transportation, competition and more. There was a core of sound advice; how it's best to focus on a tight business plan, rather than a grander plan to open a coffee shop and bookstore at the same time.

"It was absolutely one of the most beneficial things that could happen (to me)," he said. "There are so many things you don't think about when you're starting a business."

Completion of the program isn't the end of the Dog Tag Fellowship; the community continues to supply support and resilience via the alumni network - 75% of alumni engage in networking and other events semi-annually- and the advisorship scheme. Alumni have access to the Dog Tag executive team for expert consulting sessions long after graduation.

Success isn't marked by dollar signs, or a number of small businesses started, the Dog Tag Fellowship is committed to purpose, confidence, and community. The goal is to empower military families with the knowledge and strength to decide what they want to do after service and make it happen.

Applications for the [Winter 2025 Cohort](#) open July 2024.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Socks for Bunk, Inc.

Socks for Bunk, Inc. (SFB), was founded by the children of Robert S. Pettit affectionally known as Bunk, a Purple Heart Korean War Veteran. His children spent many Veterans Days with Robert and noted his passion for socks and how particular he was about the socks he wore. Robert died on Christmas Day in 2015.

In 2016, his children purchased socks and other essential items to distribute to veterans on Veterans Day to create a legacy in their father's name. Over the past eight years, SFB has distributed over 1,800 pairs of socks in care packages on Veterans Day. For information on Socks for Bunk, email Robin Pettit at socksforbunk@gmail.com.



Robin Pettit with a photo of her father Robert S. Pettit

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Memorial Day



Director Terry Prince was the grand marshal of the Mount Prospect annual Memorial Day parade and the keynote speaker at the ceremony. In his remarks, he said, "While Memorial Day may be the unofficial kickoff to the summer, we know it is so much more than that. Yes, we will conclude today's Memorial Day ceremony

with fellowship, but around our nation, there are many families who are not celebrating today. I recently read a post, by an unknown author that read:

"Today will be the most expensive holiday on the calendar. Every hot dog, every burger, every spin around the lake, or drink with friends and family...is a debt...purchased by others. This holiday comes at a cost, paid for by those who made the ultimate sacrifice in life and blood; whose moms never saw them again, whose dads wept in private, whose wives raised kids alone, and whose kids only remember through pictures. This isn't simply a day off. It is a day to remember that others paid for every free breath we ever get to take." So, I think when someone says thank you for your service, I try to imagine one of our fallen comrades who would probably whisper, "You're welcome for your freedom."

Our nation has engaged in countless conflicts where we have put men and women in grave danger...and

ultimately, their entire families. In a moment, the news of loss changes the lives of those left behind forever. We must continue to tell the stories of the fallen. Those we loved.

Even those we may have only met once and others we have only seen on a list of names on a memorial wall. In arguably one of the most famous speeches ever given. President Lincoln, in his Gettysburg address, said, "the world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. That we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave their last full measure of devotion...and that we highly resolve that they shall not have died in vain.

Bottom line--I've heard it time and time again. We honor the dead by living a life that is worthy of their sacrifice.



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

