



VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 4, Issue 10 ★ October 2024



★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

I would like to introduce IDVA's new Chief of Staff Jassen Strokosch. He brings a wealth of experience in the public and private sectors, most recently as Chief of Staff for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. The Chief of Staff plays an instrumental role in ensuring IDVA runs effectively and efficiently. Jassen will work one-on-one with our team to elevate their work and bring out their highest professional performance. While Jassen's expansive resume is impressive, I was most struck by his leadership style of drawing out the talents and experience of a team. He will join in

our approach to support and encourage our team to be creative and innovative. I am excited about what lies ahead as Jassen integrates into the IDVA community and offers his unique perspectives and experiences. We also welcomed Russell Needler as our new Chief Internal Auditor who shares his depth of government auditing experience.

This month, we recognized many important communities and issues, but I would like to point out the IDVA Human Resources team. They are creatively and aggressively recruiting for positions throughout the Agency, especially for our skilled residential homes. We are bolstering our medical professionals, dietary, social services, and staff so that we expand the number of veterans we serve. Our team is out in the community, hosting job fairs, and swiftly posting positions to recruit a high-level of talent. We are expediting the hiring process followed by an efficient and thorough training program. If you are interested in serving those who served, come join us. You will find our job postings here: <https://veterans.illinois.gov/about-us/idvajobs.html>

Please continue reading to learn more about News from the Capitol and exciting happenings at IDVA.

Thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

Sincerely,

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



News from the Capitol

In July, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) announced funding shortfalls for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) beginning October 1st and totaling \$15B. To ensure monthly benefits were paid on time, Congress [passed an emergency spending bill](#) to address the 2024 VBA shortfall.

The [PACT \(Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins\) Act of 2022](#) was signed into law in August 2022. Since that time, over 700,000 veterans have enrolled in VA health care. Serving current and new enrollees is essential, and USDVA believes the shortfall is due to:

- Need for additional staff
- Increased costs for Community Care
- Increased costs for drugs and prosthetic devices

Congress and the USDVA are creating long-term strategies to ensure that the USDVA has the funding it needs to provide veterans with their earned benefits.

Updates on the situation can be found using the following resources:

- <https://www.congress.gov/>
- <https://veterans.house.gov/>
- <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/>

If you would like to meet with an IDVA Veteran Service Officer, locate your nearest VSO here:

<https://veterans.illinois.gov/serviceoffices/vso-locator-countylist.html>

Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Welcomes New Chief of Staff



Jassen Strokosch

United States Marine Corps Veteran

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs welcomes Jassen Strokosch as its new Chief of Staff. Jassen brings extensive government, non-profit, and private sector experience to his new role and joins IDVA from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services where he recently served as the Chief of Staff. In his role at DCFS, he led a team of nearly 4,000 employees serving families across Illinois

while managing a \$2.3B budget and overseeing the Department's policy and legislative initiatives. Prior to his career in state government, Jassen served for over seven years as the Director of Communication and Engagement at Children's Home and Aid in Chicago. Jassen is a proud United States Marine Corps Veteran who holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Drake University.



Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Welcomes New Chief Internal Auditor



Russell Needler

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs welcomes Russell Needler as its Chief Internal Auditor. Russell joins IDVA from the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity where he served as its Deputy Chief Internal Auditor. In this role, he implemented strategic audit planning to comply with the Fiscal Control and Auditing Act. Russell also served in auditing roles at Cook County, the Chicago Park District, and the Office of the City Auditor in Austin, Texas. Russell

earned a Bachelor of Science in Accounting from Indiana University in Bloomington. Russell's expertise will contribute to the overall management of IDVA and ensure that we are compliant with the policies required of all state agencies.



On October 1st, IDVA Teams from across the agency showed their support of the fighters, admiration for the survivors, and remembrance for those who lost the battle to breast cancer.

Central Office – Springfield



Front row (left to right) – Yassine Elkhalidi, Crystal, Jennifer Franklin, Amanda Gray, Sean Pass, Patricia Wills, Brad Bell, LaTashia Johnson. Second row – Bill Hunt, Carla Rapps, Jackie Hughes, Shannon Shymansky. Third row – Alexandria Puccetti, Mark Patterson. Fourth Row – Steph Heckenkamp, Danielle Luevano, Matt McCormick. Last row – Director Prince, Renysya Brown.



First Row: Sijimol Santhosh - PT Aide, Emma Mendoza - PM Housekeeping Supervisor, Tasheenma Bray - SSW Dietary, Ana Huizar - Accounting Manager, Maureen Draganowski - Executive Secretary, and Jesus Alvarez - SSW Housekeeping. Second Row: Karen Boleaga - Ward Clerk, Celene Hernandez - Activities Aide, Julia Moreno - Activities Therapist, Sonia Segarra - Storekeeper II, and Sandy Thomas - RN II. Third Row: Adam LaLuz - Groundskeeper, Rovenlo Silo - MDS Coordinator, Lashell Parent - Health Information Administrator, Nisha Mani - PSA, MDS, LaTasha Powell - Account Technician I, Jeff Johnson - Engineer, Luz Gonzalez - Office Coordinator, T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson - Administrator, Brittney Chitwood - Business Administrator, Dr. Denise King - DON, and Ade Olukoya - Reimbursement Officer.

Chicago Office



Legislative Director Sara Augustinas, VSO Michele Richards, and Public Information Officer Maureen Hartigan.



SSW Housekeeping Gloria Garcia and
Social Services Worker Cheyanne Haney.

Veterans' Home at Chicago



Home Administrator T’Kira Siler-Wilkerson
and Dietary –SSW) Bini Mani.



*Metro Region Supervisor Robert Iverson and
Veteran Service Officer Claudia Bautista.*

Veterans' Home at LaSalle



*left to right: Donna Neislowski - PTA III, Bonnie LaFollette - PTA III,
and Melissa Duncan - PTA III.*

Veterans' Home at Quincy



Administration Building left to right: Chuck Newton - Administrator, Hannah Ajdinovich - Business Administrator, Kim Niekamp - Business Office, Jessica William - Business Office, Bridgette Randall - Medical Billing, Tracy Brown - Medical Billing, Danell Tullock - HR, Kasaundra Morelock - HR, Sierra Burcham - HR, and Amanda Bunch - Adjutant



Markwood (left to right): Denesa Smith - VNAC, Triana Best – VNAC, Michelle Daugherty - PSA Nursing Supervisor, and Sandy Koontz - OA Ward Clerk

Veterans' Home at Manteno



Ashley Munson and Becky Tofte



Left to right: Michelle Landsmann, Brenda Colclasure, MeLinda Marrs and Tamara Lippelt.



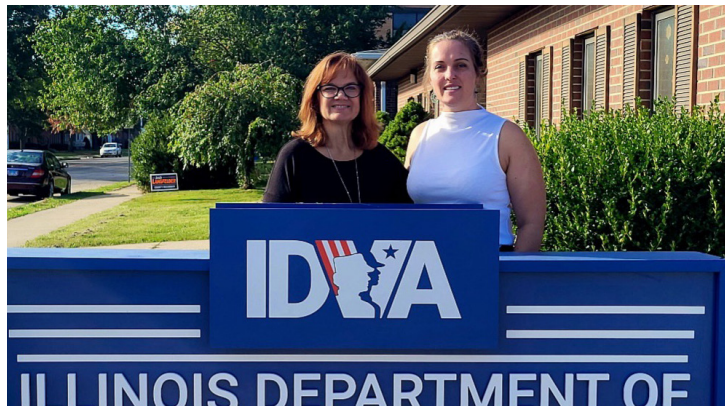
Front row: left to right: Rose Ann Winkel, Carolyn Domont,
Trisha Meherg, MeLinda Marrs, Tamara Lippelt, Cathy Kirksey,
Kelley Kelley, Ken Kuczero and Luke Landsmann.
Back row: April McCarthy and Tanya Smith, Administrator.



Human Resources Professionals Day

Human Resources is fundamental to any organization's success. IDVA's HR team helps ensure our most precious asset—our people—serve veterans in a wide variety of roles at the Homes, Field Locations, and Central Offices. As a mission-based agency, IDVA attracts a unique pool of applicants who are interested in serving veterans and our creative and dedicated Human Resources team supports IDVA in achieving our mission of serving those who have served.

Central Office



Adriana (Ann) Holladay, Recruiter & HR Specialist and Alexandria Puccetti, Human Resources Deputy Director.



Ann Holladay recruiting at the XXVII Celebracion De Las Fiesta Patria in Beardstown.

Veterans' Home at Anna



Tammy Wieseman - HR Representative

Veterans' Home at Chicago



Ben Davis - HR Specialist, Teresa Menendez - HR Specialist, Kelly Torres - HR Associate, and Dan Kerr - HR Associate.

Veterans' Home at Manteno



Danel Peters – HR Representative, Elizabeth Bartke – HR Associate, Miki Doris – HR Associate, Adrienne MacQueen – HR Representative, Rhonda Boudreau – HR Specialist.

Veterans' Home at Quincy



Sierra Burcham - HR Assistant, Danell Tullock - HR Assistant, Lisa Wand - Interim HR Specialist, Kasaundra Morelock - HR Associate.

Veterans' Home at LaSalle



Michele Hansen, Diane Spiegel, Courtney Suarez.



Dena Robbins: Veterans' Home at LaSalle Administrator

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs is pleased to announce that Acting LaSalle Veterans' Home Administrator Dena Robbins has been confirmed as its Administrator. Dena joined the Home in 2009 as a Veterans Nursing Assistant - Certified (VNAC) where her passion for serving veterans motivated her to earn a Bachelor of Science in Healthcare Administration from the Illinois Valley Community College, as well a Nursing Home Administrator License. She served as the Home's office assistant and office coordinator until her assignment as its acting administrator.

"Dena exemplifies the growth a health care professional may experience while serving Illinois' veterans in its residential homes," said Director Prince. "The Home and its residents are fortunate to have someone like Dena who leads with compassion and gratitude."

Auto Show at the Veterans' Home at Chicago



Veterans' Home at Chicago resident and U.S. Coast Guard veteran Donald Duncan.



Field Services

As part of Field Services efforts to meet veterans where they are, Veteran Service Officers (VSO) participate in resource fairs and events across the state. Community outreach offers veterans one-on-one connection with VSOs to learn about how IDVA can support their efforts in learning about and receiving their earned benefits. Veterans are invited to contact IDVA to work one-on-one with a VSO to file or appeal claims. IDVA VSOs are veterans and understand the critical need to identify benefits to ease a transition and lay the groundwork for a successful and rewarding life. To locate a Veteran Service Officer, visit: <https://veterans.illinois.gov/serviceoffices/vso-locator-countylist.html>. These photos represent the many events VSOs attended throughout October.



Veteran Service Officer Gerald Enriquez attends the UAW Local 588 Veterans Appreciation Day.



Veteran Service Officer Anthony Hernandez attended the Will County VAC VetFest.



Veteran Service Officer Melissa Downey helps a Veteran at the Johnny Appleseed Event in Crystal Lake.



IDVA hosted a PACT Act Clinic for veterans at its new office in Des Plaines. Veteran Service Officer Jesse Reyes.



Veteran Service Officers Shynae Murphy and Malon Norfleet assist a veteran at the Governors State University Resource Fair.



Veteran Service Office Matt Taylor and new VSO Deidre Worple attended the Senior Health Fair hosted by State Senator Rezin in Oglesby.

Field Services

Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Welcomes Veteran Service Officer



Kayla Bair

Active Guard Reserves

Kayla Bair joins IDVA as a Veteran Service Office for McDonough County. Her most recent experience includes serving in the the Active Guard Reserves as an Administrator for the 169th Air Support Operations Squadron in Peoria, IL . She also served as a C-130 Crew Chief for the 182nd Maintenance Squadron (Peoria). Kayla deployed to Afghanistan in 2010. She earned her bachelor's degree in agriculture from Western

Illinois University and her associate degree in aviation and private pilot's license from Quincy University. She and her husband have three children and enjoy spending time hunting, fishing, and riding horses. Kayla looks forward to giving back to her community and serving other veterans and their families.



Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Welcomes Veteran Service Officer in Quincy



Jeremy Hoelscher

U.S. Army veteran

Jeremy Hoelscher, U.S. Army veteran, joins IDVA's Veteran Service Officer's team serving the Quincy area. He has worked for the State of Illinois including the Rushville Treatment and Detention Center and 15 years with the Veterans' Home at Quincy, most recently as a Security Officer. While in the Army, Jeremy was a Mental Health Specialist at the William Beaumont Army Medical Center in El Paso, TX near Fort Bliss.

He enjoys spending time with wife Mary, who also works for the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, and his son Jacob. As a VSO, Jeremy looks forward to helping veterans and their families navigate life transitions and obtain their earned benefits.



Gold Star Families Weekend

Gold Star families from across the state joined in Bloomington for the annual weekend of fellowship, events, and programs. It is a weekend to share stories and memories through tears and laughter. The weekend culminated with the Mother's Day luncheon and Yellow Rose Ceremony. For more information on IDVA's Gold Star program, visit: [Gold Star Families](#).



Gold Star families in Bloomington, Illinois.

The Illinois Attorney General invites you to attend webinars to assist Veterans and Service Members



Dear Colleague,

I recognize that the physical and psychological effects of military duty often continue after the tour of duty ends. Likewise, our state's and our country's support for the troops does not stop when they come home.

My Military and Veterans Rights Bureau is dedicated to ensuring that veterans and active duty military service members receive the benefits they have earned. The bureau provides men and women with assistance, including mediation, investigation and litigation. These webinars will provide valuable information to support our service members and veterans and those that work with these individuals.

The What to Know About Veteran Consumer Scams Webinar will provide an overview of common veterans scams, how to spot them and what to do if you may have encountered one. Service members, veterans, their families, and advocacy organizations are welcome to attend. The webinar will be held on **November 7, 2024, from 10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.**

Webinar for Veterans Advocates and Service Organizations which will include overviews of the Illinois Attorney General's Military and Veterans Rights, Charitable Trust, Disability Rights and Public Access Counselor (PAC) Bureaus. Staff members will share more information on the services and resources they provide and how they can assist the veteran community. The webinar will be held on **November 13, 2024, from 12:00 p.m. – 1:00 pm.**

I encourage service members, veterans, their families, and advocacy organizations to participate in one or more of these free webinars. To RSVP, please register via the links provided or contact special.events@ilag.gov.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K Raoul", is positioned above the name Kwame Raoul.

Kwame Raoul
Illinois Attorney General

How to enroll:

To register for a webinar, click on the Zoom registration link and you will be directed to the registration site. Once you are registered, you will receive the log in information. If you need assistance registering or to request reasonable accommodations, please contact Theresa Geary at special.events@ilag.gov or 1-866-376-7215. Individuals with hearing or speech disabilities can reach us by using the 7-1-1 relay service.

What to Know About Veteran Consumer Scams Webinar Registration Link:

Thursday, November 7, 2024
10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

Register in advance:

<https://tinyurl.com/mwhuzk6a>



Informational Webinar for Veterans Advocates and Service Organizations Registration Link:

Wednesday, November 13, 2024
12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Register in advance

<https://tinyurl.com/28yutbf9>



★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Women Veterans

The women veterans' population in Illinois is over 50,000 and growing. IDVA is invested in reaching out to women veterans to build community and communicate how IDVA can help them with their unique challenges. Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson has been connecting with women veterans' service organizations to exchange ideas on how to advocate for women veterans.



Women Veterans Program Manager Margo Watson and Veteran Service Officer Cynthia McKee (Chicago) at the NABMW 23rd Biennial Convention.



The National Association of Black Military Women 23rd Biennial Convention in Chicago brought together and celebrated African American Members from around the United States. IDVA's Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson with Dr. Annette Tucker Osborne, COL (R), President of the National Association of Black Military Women (NABMW), formally known as "The Black WAAC, WAC, Women In Service."



The 2024 Quadrennial Women Veterans Summit "The Year of Empowerment" was held in Washington, DC and covered topics such as benefits, services and opportunities for women. State Women Veteran Coordinators: left to right: Venessa Thomas - Florida, Veda Brooks - Georgia (NASWVC Senior Vice President), Margo Watson - Illinois, Dina Parrot - Kentucky (NASWVC Historian), and Laura McKee - Indiana (NASWVC Training Committee Lead).



Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson addresses the Women Warriors Event at Malcolm X College in Chicago.



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.



**ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS**

★ Follow us

