VETERANS CONNECTIONS
News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 6, Issue 3 ★ March 2026

★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

Spring has arrived in a flash and what a busy month it has been. Recently, I attended the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) conference in Washington, DC, where I was honored to be elected its president, the first president from Illinois since Homer G. Bradley in 1948, the year NASDVA was founded. NASDVA members represent all fifty states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. It is a powerful force advocating for veterans across the nation.

As president, one of my first official duties was to testify before the Joint House/Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, alongside the Paralyzed Veterans of America, AMVETS, Wounded Warrior Project, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, National Guard Association of the United States, and Mission Roll Call. We shared a unified message to Congress to elevate support for issues impacting veterans, and this year, there was a big focus on women veterans, the fastest-growing population of veterans. We testified about the importance of expanding health care designated specifically for women veterans.

I'm thankful for the opportunity Governor Pritzker has given me to lead IDVA, and I am humbled to be a part of an organization where the unified voice of NASDVA serves as a powerful beacon of hope in the hearts and minds of those we are privileged to serve.

My colleagues; Andrew Tangen, the Superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Lake County, and U.S. Navy veteran, is also the President of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO). Additionally, Jen Solum, Superintendent of the Will County Veterans Assistance Commission and veteran of the U.S. Air Force, was recently elected as President of the Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions. Andrew and Jen are fearless leaders who look out for the best interests of veterans at every turn. As you can see, Illinois is well represented in leadership advocating for veterans across the state and nation.

I hope you dig into this issue to see all of the exciting things happening for veterans and their families in Illinois.

Thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

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

Director Prince testifying before the Joint House/Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

Education

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs withdrew its appeal of the Supreme Court ruling in favor of Army veteran James Rudsill, creating an opportunity for 1.2 million veterans to receive educational benefits. As reported by the USDVA website: "On April 16, 2024 the Supreme Court of the United States decided that if you served at least two periods of service, one that qualifies for the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) and another that qualifies for the Post-9/11 GI Bill (PGIB), you may be able to receive both benefits for up to 48-months of entitlement.

Since that announcement, the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims' decided in Perkins v. Collins that Veterans who served for a single obligated period of sufficient length could also be eligible for two different education programs based on different months and days of service within that single obligated period."

To learn more about the decision, visit: Impact of Rudisill Supreme Court Decision on Veterans' Education Benefits - Education and Training

To find out if you are eligible for these benefits, visit an IDVA Veteran Service Officer.

Lottery Veterans Cash Grant Feature

Donka Inc, is a recipient of a Veterans Cash Grant.
This article is contributed by Donka, Inc., and is published with permission.

From Service to Success: Donka's Operation Brighter Futures

For nearly four decades, Donka, Inc. has helped veterans and individuals with disabilities gain the skills needed to thrive in today's technology-driven workforce. As one of the only organizations in its region offering 1:1 computer training and job placement services, Donka provides veterans with the support they need to successfully transition into new careers.

Through its Operation Brighter Futures program, Donka delivers comprehensive training designed specifically for veterans, including those navigating disabilities and other post-service barriers. Supported by funding from the Illinois Veterans' Cash Grant Program, Donka provides computer skills training, job readiness preparation, and job placement services at no cost to participating veterans. Students begin with Donka's Computer Basics course, where they build essential digital skills using the Microsoft 365 suite. The course is approved by the Illinois Board of Higher Education and is also available to eligible veterans using VA education benefits/GI Bill.

"We are deeply grateful for Shannon Shymansky's support of Donka," said Executive Director Leanne Vos. "Her advocacy through the Illinois Department of Veteran Affairs helps connect veterans with the opportunities and services they have earned and deserve."

Donka student and veteran, Kevin Sullivan, shared, "Donka made learning possible for someone like me. I gained skills I can put on a resume, built confidence, and now feel more capable in a digital world."

To further support veterans seeking employment, Donka is hosting "What It Takes to Get Hired," a webinar in collaboration with Old Second National Bank on April 9, 2026, from 11:00 AM to 12:00 PM via Zoom. Veterans and job seekers are encouraged to register and take advantage of this opportunity to hear directly from hiring professionals about what employers are really looking for and how to stand out in today's competitive job market. To register: click on the link or scan the QR code.

To learn about eligibility and criteria for a Veterans Cash Grant, visit here.

25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders in 2026

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) and the USDVA Women's Health Department partnered to select 25 Illinois Women Veterans Leaders of 2026. Women veterans were nominated for their extraordinary leadership, contributions, and commitment to the women veteran community. The 25 women veterans were honored at a luncheon at Malcolm X College on March 16th. The program included remarks by IDVA Director Terry Prince and a keynote address from Ashley Tuburan, U.S. Navy veteran, attorney, and founder of DONUT MESS WITH HER, LLC.

"The women selected were among an impressive collection of nominees," said Director Terry Prince. "Each woman veteran has identified unmet needs and challenges and bravely approached them with innovation and determination, resulting in a profound impact on the community."

The 2026 honorees are:

Melissa Beckford *(Army)*
Justyna Berry *(Army)*
Staci Boyer *(Navy)*
Rochelle Crump *(Army)*
Lourdes Hurtado Fernando *(Army)*
Dr. Glenisha Foreman *(Marine Corps)*
Tawanda Hanible *(Marnie Corps)*
Melissa Farmer-Hill *(Army)*
Dr. Sonia Kennedy *(Army)*
Celeste Latham *(Air Force)*
Nicole Mandeville *(Army)*
Dr. Nikelcia Marcelin *(Army)*
Dr. Karen Stendson-McMillan *(Army)*
Nancy O'Connell *(Air Force)*
Ashley Owings *(Army, Navy)*
Ramona Pozek *(Army)*
Telisha Reinhardt *(Navy)*
Jen Solum *(Air Force)*
Shirley Spruiel *(Army)*
Aretha Spurlock *(Army)*
Amiee Wagoner *(Army)*
Kimyada Wellington *(Army)*
Shamika White *(Navy)*
Katia Woods *(Army)*
Shannon Yount *(Marine Corps)*

Women's History Month

March is nationally recognized as Women's History Month, dedicated to celebrating the vital contributions women have made to our nation's history, culture, and progress. For the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Women Veterans Program, it provides a meaningful opportunity to recognize and honor the courage, leadership, and service of the women who have worn our nation's uniform.

The origins of Women's History Month date back to 1981, when Congress first established "Women's History Week", to coincide with International Women's Day on March 8th. In 1987, the observance expanded to the entire month to reflect on the achievements of women throughout American history and recognize their impact in every field, including military service.

Women have served in America's military since the Revolutionary War, often overcoming barriers while demonstrating exceptional resilience and dedication. Today, women continue to play an increasingly vital role in defending our nation. Nationally, more than 2.1 million women veterans live in the United States, and women are now the fastest-growing group within the veteran population.

Illinois is home to nearly 55,000 women veterans, representing about 10 percent of the state's veteran population, and that number continues to grow each year. Their service spans every branch of the military and every mission area – from combat operations and aviation to intelligence, logistics, medicine, and leadership roles.

This Women's History Month, the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Women Veterans Program, as featured in the previous article, recognized the outstanding leadership and service of women veterans across our state through the 25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders of 2026. These remarkable women represent the strength, resilience, and continued impact of women who have served and who now lead in their communities, professions, and veteran advocacy efforts.

We also encourage women veterans to ensure their stories are preserved and shared by registering their service history with the Military Women's Memorial. By documenting their experiences, women veterans help ensure that the legacy of women's military service is recognized, remembered, and honored for generations to come. To register, visit: https://womensmemorial.org.

During Women's History Month and throughout the year, the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs remains committed to recognizing the extraordinary contributions of women veterans and ensuring they have access to the benefits, resources, and recognition they have earned through their service. Their courage, leadership, and dedication continue to strengthen communities across Illinois and our nation.

IDVA is Hiring

Interested in Serving those Who Served?

To learn about opportunities at IDVA and tips for applying for state jobs, attend one of IDVA's online virtual job fairs.

4/1/2026	5:30-6:15 PM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward
4/3/2026	9:00-9:45AM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees
4/6/2026	1:30-2:15PM	How to read a Job Bulletin
4/9/2026	2:00-2:45 PM	Interview Tips and Tricks
4/14/2026	12:00-12:45 PM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points
4/15/2026	5:30-6:15 PM	How to read a Job Bulletin
4/17/2026	3:00-3:45PM	Interview Tips and Tricks
4/23/2026	12:00-12:45 PM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward
4/23/2026	5:30-6:15 PM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward
4/27/2026	2:00-2:45 PM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees
4/30/2026	10:00-10:45AM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points

Veteran Service Itinerate Office Open in Champaign

Veterans Seeking Assistance with Claims and Benefits, visit

Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs

Veteran Service Officers Diane Moncrief and Patrick Sergent

Itinerate

Salvation Army Veteran Resource Center
2212 North Market Street, Champaign, IL
First and third Thursday
10:00 AM to 3:30 PM (break from 12:00 PM – 12:30 PM)

Scan to schedule an appointment.

Diane Moncrief
diane.moncrief@illinois.gov
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100-Day Challenge to Prevent Homelessness

The Office to Prevent and End Homelessness (OPEH), in partnership with the Supportive Housing Providers Association (SHPA) and RE!NSTITUTE, launched a 100-Day Challenge on homelessness prevention in late February 2026. A cohort of five communities from across the state (Lake, DuPage, Rockford, Springfield, and Macon Communities of Care (COCs)) will embark on a 100-Day Challenge to prevent homelessness in their local communities while also belonging to a state-wide movement. IDVA participates in the OPEH's Illinois Homeless Response Collaborative (IHRC) that supports these types of efforts aimed at preventing homelessness across Illinois. IDVA's Senior Policy Advisor, Hannah Bonecutter, was in attendance to learn more about how these COCs will design their 100-Day Challenge and the positive impact they may have on our homeless veterans across Illinois. Previous 100-Day Challenges in Illinois have supported veterans, youth, and people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The 100-Day Challenge initiates cross-community networking and learning that can inform housing and homelessness policy and practices impacting our diverse Illinois population.

Team IDVA

Michele Cusumano joins IDVA as its new Human Resources Director, where she will oversee IDVA's recruiting, hiring, and retention of employees across the state. In her executive leadership position, she will be instrumental in ensuring that the Homes, Veterans Service offices, and Central office are staffed with the highest level of professionals and staff. She leads a team that is aggressively recruiting and hiring for roles that are critical in serving Illinois veterans.

Michele brings 38 years of experience with the State of Illinois, including 25 years in Human Resources and Labor Relations. Most recently, Michele was the Human Resources Director for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, where she oversaw the agency's comprehensive, statewide human resources program. Over her career, she was also the Human Resources Director for the Office of the Comptroller and Department of Innovation and Technology. In 2004, she was appointed by the Governor as a trustee to the Illinois State Retirement System. Her early career included roles with the Illinois Department of Public Health and the Capital Development Board.

Michele has two daughters, Natalie and Alayna, and three "bonus" daughters, Rachel, Alex, and Olivia. She enjoys traveling, concerts, sporting events, and time with family and friends.

"I love to be challenged, and I am committed to developing a strong team environment where everyone will thrive and be successful. I am excited to be here, and I look forward to working with everyone who makes a positive impact on the Illinois veterans.

Governor's Office Academy of Leadership

The 2026 class of the Governor's Office Academy of Leadership with Governor JB Pritzker.

Brittney Chitwood, Business Administrator, Joins the 2026 G.O.A.L. Cohort

The Governor's Office Academy of Leadership is a premier leadership development program and strategic investment in the future of Illinois State Government. The program advances excellence in public service leadership through an 11-month cohort program with a monthly in-person session facilitated by industry leaders, academics, and the Governor's staff. The sessions alternate between Chicago and Springfield and include monthly virtual sessions to reinforce and deepen understanding. IDVA is proud that Brittney Chitwood, Business Administrator for the Veterans' Home at Chicago, was selected for the 2026 cohort.

Brittney has been with IDVA since 2023 and with the state of Illinois for over 15 years, beginning as a mental health technician with the developmentally disabled population at the Illinois Department of Human Services. While working and advancing her career, she earned a degree in Business Administration and Project Management. Brittney was featured on a segment of CBS news featuring Veterans' Home at Chicago employees who find serving veterans meaningful.

"As a disabled veteran, she found a position that ignited her passion, helping her brothers and sisters in arms. She stands proud of that fact that her passion aligns with the mission and goals of IDVA and looks forward to what she can learn in the future."

PURPLE UP DAY!

Wednesday, April 15th

Please join Team IDVA in support of the over 1.6 million children of military service members by wearing Purple!! On an average, they move every two to three years. They are uprooted from their friends, schools, and community to build a new support network. They are resilient, adaptable, and strong. **We thank them for their service.**

Please send your photos to Communications Director Maureen Hartigan, maureen.hartigan@illinois.gov

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**

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