



VAU

Veterans' Accountability Unit Annual Report

2025



ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS





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★ Letter from the VAU Director ★

To the Governor, the Honorable Members of the General Assembly, and the People of Illinois:

This report summarizes the activities of the Illinois Veterans' Accountability Unit (VAU).



During State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2025, the VAU established an avenue for Veterans to express their concerns about services received from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA). The VAU is in the process of developing a foundation that allows the Veterans of Illinois, their families and their caregivers, a safe space to voice their concerns as well as their praises, and recommendations on how the IDVA can better serve the Veteran community within Illinois. Still in its infancy, the VAU continues to push forward with the tenacity necessary to establish resources required to adequately perform the duties of the Unit as outlined in legislation. Below you will find a few examples of how the VAU has ensured the voices of Veterans receiving

services in the State of Illinois are being heard:

- Increased communication and collaboration with the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs leadership.
- Coordinated the JROTC competition at the Illinois State Fair in Springfield, IL.
- Assisted IDVA middle management with building a rapport that fostered an increased level of trust and confidence within their areas of responsibility.
- Assisted IDVA employees with ensuring their concerns about pay increases and promotions were adequately addressed.
- Assisted Illinois Veterans with locating necessary resources provided by the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

These accomplishments, thus far, are due to the dedication to service those who have served along with the desire and necessity to promote accountability within the IDVA. Accountability has a tremendous impact on the delivery of services to our Nation's heroes.

The VAU was established to improve and promote accountability within IDVA. As the inaugural Director of the VAU, I am committed to ensuring that fellow Veterans and families are provided resources to assist with recommendations and concerns about Veteran services provided in the State of Illinois. As we continue to work towards this goal, we recognize the significance of the mission and its impact on those who have served.

Sincerely,

Renysa Brown

Director

Illinois Veterans' Accountability Unit

Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) - Combat Veteran

★ Veterans' Accountability Unit (VAU) Overview ★

The Illinois Veterans' Accountability Unit (VAU) was created by Illinois Statute, 20 ILCS 2805/39, Public Act 102-695 effective June 1, 2022, and is established to receive complaints and recommendations from: Veterans and other Illinois residents who seek services from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA); residents of Illinois Veterans' Homes, their families, and visitors; vendors and contractors of the IDVA; and staff of the IDVA.

In accordance with 20 ILCS 2805/39, the Veterans' Accountability Unit functions independently of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs. The Director and staff of the Veterans' Accountability Unit have the authority to access all offices and facilities of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans' Homes and shall have access to all information, documents, and personnel of the Department as needed to perform the duties of the Veterans' Accountability Unit.

Additionally, in accordance with 20 ILCS 2805/39, the Director of the Veterans' Accountability Unit may recommend changes to the Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs concerning Department policies or practices based upon information learned or observations made by the Veterans' Accountability Unit staff during the course of their duties.

Mission Statement

The Illinois Veterans' Accountability Unit's mission is to ensure that Veterans, staff, and the public have an appropriate means to file complaints or make recommendations regarding policies and procedures at the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, to promote and improve the safety, quality, and protections provided to Illinois Veterans and staff.

Purpose

The Veterans' Accountability Unit (VAU) supports the administrative structure necessary to accept compliments, recommendations, and field general questions about the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) operations, policies, and procedures. The VAU also ensures all complaints, allegations, or incidents of possible misconduct, misfeasance, malfeasance, or violations of rules, procedures, or laws by any employee, service provider, or contractor of the IDVA are reported to the Office of Executive Inspector General (OEIG) for the Agencies of the Illinois Governor.

Confidentiality

The VAU maintains confidentiality of investigations, including files, reports, and complainant and witness identities, to the maximum extent allowable, but must disclose this information to the OEIG. If any investigative information, including files and reports, is requested by any person or entity outside of the VAU, the VAU must first consult the OEIG.

★ Complaint Process ★

Complaints may be received by the VAU through any method, including telephone, letter, fax, email, IDVA intranet or in person. Complaints involving discrimination or sexual harassment must be in writing. Complaints and requests for assistance may come from any source, including Veterans, IDVA managers, supervisors, employees, residents, or the public.

Upon receipt of a complaint, the VAU enters the complaint details into a log maintained by the VAU. The log includes information such as the date of the complaint, the person making the complaint (if known) and a summary of the complaint. The Director of VAU promptly notifies the OEIG of all complaints received, as required.

The Director of the VAU reports notifications of all complaints, allegations, or incidents of possible misconduct, misfeasance, malfeasance, or violations of rules, procedures, or laws by any employee, service provider, or contractor of the IDVA, to the OEIG. The OEIG assesses the complaints, allegations, and incidents and determines whether to investigate, refer to the appropriate agency, refer to any appropriate law enforcement agency, request a response from the IDVA regarding the complaint, allegations, or incident, or refer back to the VAU to conduct further inquiry or review if necessary.

★ VAU Access ★

Under the law, the VAU shall have full access to any, and all, IDVA records, data, or other information deemed necessary to carry out their duties. All agreements, contracts, etc. shall include a provision to this effect. The VAU is also authorized to request information or assistance from other governmental or private entities as necessary. All IDVA parties involved will cooperate, provide records, information, interviews, or other assistance as requested. The IDVA Director and IDVA staff will not prevent or prohibit the VAU from initiating, carrying out, or completing any function of the VAU.

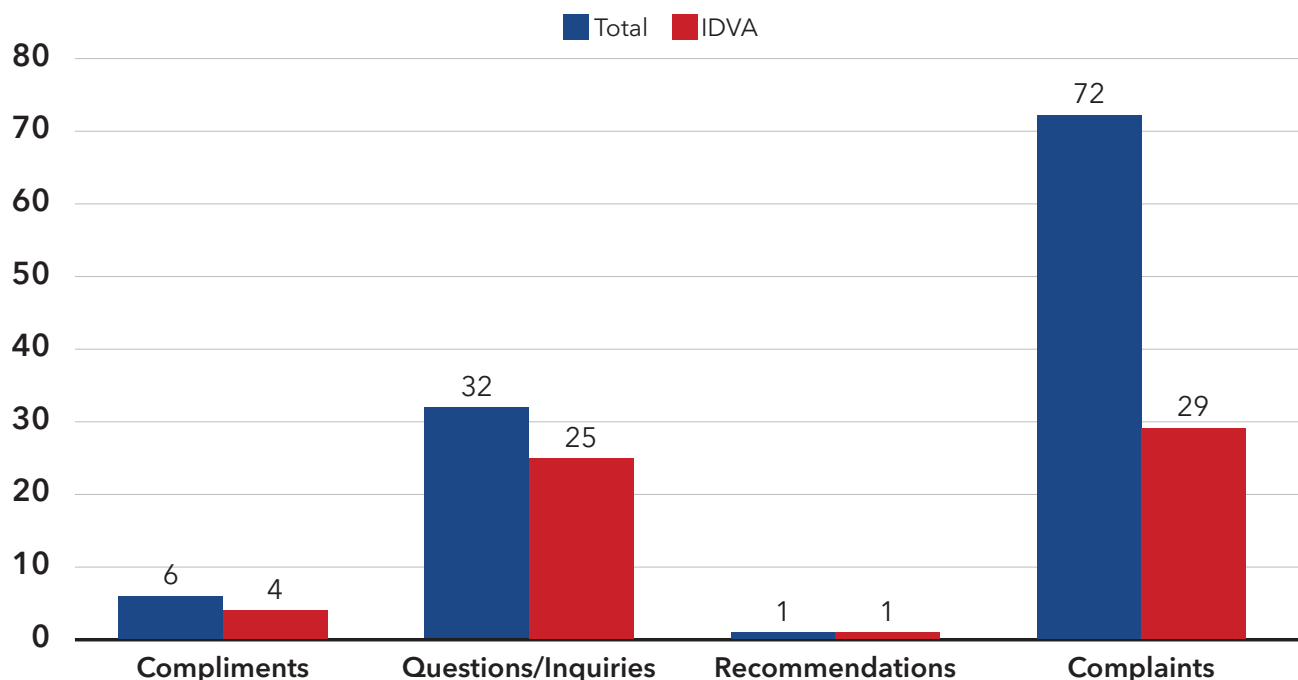
★ Site Visits ★

The VAU visits the IDVA facilities and/or offices, Illinois Veterans' Homes, and the Illinois Veterans' Service Offices around the state in an effort to be visible and create another avenue for complaints and recommendations to be addressed. During these site visits, employees, residents of the homes, and contractors can provide recommendations on how to improve the Veteran Home, office environment, employee relationships, current policies and procedures, and morale of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs. Site visits also provide an opportunity for Veterans and staff to file a complaint with the VAU in person, which increases the level of trust that issues and concerns are being heard and addressed appropriately.

★ IDVA Compliments, Inquiries, Recommendations and Complaints SFY 2025 ★

The VAU received a combined total of 110 cases during State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2025. Cases comprised of compliments, questions/inquiries, recommendations, and complaints about the services provided by the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) and the US Department of Veterans Affairs (US DVA).

VAU CASES SFY25



Compliments

The VAU received four (4) compliments concerning IDVA that praised the actions and attentiveness of three (3) Veteran Service Officers (VSO), as well as the genuine concern provided by the VAU. The remainder of the compliments were directed towards the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

- ★ "We had an appointment yesterday with (VSO...). (VSO) does a wonderful job and was very helpful!!"
- ★ "In September of this year, I contacted (VSO) for assistance in filing a claim with the VA. (VSO) made an appointment for me and then proceeded to assist me in filing a disability claim for hearing loss. (VSO) was very well informed as to the process and explained completely to me the process and what to expect as the claim progressed. Ultimately my claim was approved. I am writing to let the Department know how much I appreciate the assistance I received and point out the professionalism and competence of (VSO). I feel (VSO) is a valuable asset to the IDVA and Illinois Veterans."
- ★ "My VSO..., provided a lasting service in advancing my disability claim. It was a credit to Veterans and public servants alike. Within a short span of less than two months, (VSO) guidance was like a tonic to a battered claim felt to be without a pulse."
- ★ "Thank you to the VAU for your genuine concern, time and blazing effort poured into my pay issue. I really appreciate your attention to this matter."

Inquiries/Questions

The VAU received and addressed 32 questions/inquiries during SFY 25. 78 percent of the inquiries concerned IDVA. The remaining inquiries/questions were concerning programs or facilities controlled by the federal government. The VAU explains the difference between the IDVA and the US DVA and does as much as possible to provide a soft handoff to the appropriate US DVA department for answers or resolutions.

The VAU ensures all questions and inquiries are provided a quick and adequate response. If for some reason, the VAU is unable to fully answer the question, the appropriate section within the IDVA is contacted for response. The VAU ensures the subject matter expert of the area in question provides a timely response and the individual requesting the information is satisfied and fully understands the answers they received.

IDVA Recommendations

There were no formal recommendations made to the IDVA Director by the VAU, however, the VAU made several suggestions to different levels of leadership that proved to be beneficial to building a positive rapport between middle managers and members of their teams. Additionally, there was one recommendation submitted to the VAU by a Veteran that suggested the IDVA pursue getting the US DVA to reopen the offer for reimbursement of claims for non-VA Emergency Medical Care from 2010-2024 and ensure all military service organizations are educated on the offering so that their members can file claims. This recommendation was passed on to IDVA leadership for consideration.

Complaints

All complaints, allegations, or incidents of possible misconduct, misfeasance, malfeasance, or violations of rules, procedures, or laws by any employee, service provider, or contractor of IDVA were reported to the OEIG for review. The VAU received a total of 72 complaints during SFY 25. 29 complaints concerned the IDVA or other state agencies. The OEIG sent 19 of the complaints back to the VAU to handle as deemed necessary.

The remaining 43 complaints were concerning US DVA programs or facilities. Complaints received concerning any US DVA programs or facilities are referred to the Patient Advocates of the respective facility, the US DVA Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection, the US DVA Office of Inspector General, or other appropriate US DVA office to be addressed.

★ Summary of Complaints ★

The VAU received complaints from Veterans, families of Veterans, IDVA employees and concerned citizens about issues at IDVA Veterans' Homes, IDVA VSO Offices and the IDVA Central Office. In all these matters, once referred back to the VAU by the OEIG, the VAU investigated the complaint and acted in accordance with its statutory duty. Where appropriate, the VAU reported the issues to IDVA leadership and worked to resolve the complaints with the complainant.

IDVA Veterans' Homes

- ★ 67 percent of the complaints received concerning the Illinois Veterans' Homes were from IDVA employees. These complaints largely concerned issues with untimely wage increases, not receiving back pay, and misuse of benefit time. Other employee complaints included issues with job postings, the inability to work 12-hour shifts, staffing levels, and the unprofessionalism of IDVA leadership at one of the IDVA Homes.
 - The VAU worked closely with IDVA Payroll to validate complaints concerning untimely wage increases and back pay issues. The discrepancies were determined to be valid and were acknowledged and corrected by IDVA payroll immediately.
 - Additional untimely wage increases and back pay inquiries received from the same IDVA Home raised concerns of a systemic issue. The VAU reported the issues to the IDVA Assistant Director, as a result, IDVA launched a payroll audit of the Home with the pay issues.
 - The VAU researched the issues concerning the inability to work 12 hour shifts, the concerns about staffing levels, and the issues with job postings and discovered that all these issues are actively being worked by IDVA HR.
 - IDVA plans to provide additional oversight and training in appropriate areas to reduce future pay issues, increase morale, and avoid an atmosphere of unprofessionalism.
- ★ The remaining 33 percent of complaints were from resident Veterans or their family members who were not satisfied with the level of care the Veteran was receiving and visitation restrictions placed on them by the legal system.
 - The VAU reviewed IDVA Homes Policies concerning the level and type of care the Veteran was being provided. After discussing the Veteran's situation with the Senior Homes Administrator, the policy was further explained to the family, and they were provided contact information for their respective Ombudsman for assistance with advocating for the level of care they felt was appropriate.
 - The VAU verified the visitation restrictions placed on the Veteran's family member and suggested that the family member seek legal counsel for assistance with getting the restriction removed.

IDVA VSO Offices

- ★ Veteran interaction with IDVA Veteran Service Officers (VSO) has shown improvement over the last three years. The downturn on the number of complaints received by the VAU speaks volumes for the work being performed by the IDVA VSOs. Complaints specifically directed against the VSOs included but were not limited to: calls not being returned in a timely manner, the lack of privacy in the VSO office due to its location, as well as rude and unfavorable treatment by two (2) different VSOs.
 - The VAU was aware of the situation concerning the lack of privacy as well as the reason for the untimely response from a VSO and was able to provide the complainant a favorable explanation concerning the issues without engaging IDVA leadership about the matters.
 - The VAU notified the appropriate level of IDVA management of the rude and unfavorable treatment by two (2) different VSOs which resulted in an appropriate level of discipline.

IDVA Central Office

- ★ The VAU received 3 complaints from Veterans in different counties who felt they were incorrectly denied The Standard Homestead Exemption for Veterans with Disabilities (SHEVD).
 - The Standard Homestead Exemption for Veterans with Disabilities (SHEVD) is a property tax benefit for veterans with service-connected disabilities, outlined in the Property Tax Code (35 ILCS 200/15-169).
 - Over the last two years, the VAU received several email inquiries about the SHEVD. IDVA can assist with obtaining USDVA documents; however, the benefit is administered at the county level. Veterans apply with their county assessor's office, and the office makes determinations on eligibility.
 - The VAU provided complainants information about the ability to appeal to their county's Board of Review.
 - IDVA advocated for a legislative change, and HB 612 was signed into law during the summer of 2024 (P.A. 103-0596).
- ★ In addition to the complaints received concerning the SHEVD, the VAU received complaints which cited concerns of a toxic work environment, the inability to effectively communicate with IDVA leadership, concerns of favoritism by IDVA leaders towards personal friends who applied for positions at IDVA, and the failure to properly disclose affiliations with applicants prior to participating on interview panels.
 - VAU recommended each complainant request a meeting with the IDVA Assistant Director to express their concerns with the management issues that were presented.
 - The VAU did not find any indication of a personal connection in the complaint concerning the failure to properly disclose affiliations with applicants prior to participating on interview panels. The applicant and interviewer both denied knowing each other. They did work at the same State Agency during a short period of time but in different areas and in different locations.
- ★ Due to the inability to contact the complainant, the VAU did not act on anonymous complaints that were submitted if they lacked sufficient information for the VAU to initiate action.

★ Additional Veteran Assistance ★

In addition to fielding emails and calls about the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, the VAU also receives calls and emails from Veterans, their family members, and caregivers seeking assistance with services they receive from the US Department of Veterans Affairs (US DVA). While the VAU does not have any authority or oversight of any US DVA programs or services, the VAU strives to ensure that every Veteran within the State of Illinois receives the care, attention, and services they have earned, and thus works to assist these Veterans in finding the appropriate programs and resources.

The office of the VAU is co-located with the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs at
833 S. Spring Street, Springfield, IL 62704

The VAU operates during normal business hours Monday – Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. A toll-free helpline (1-855-660-7011) and a dedicated email address, IDVA.accountability@illinois.gov, has been established for the purpose of accepting complaints, recommendations and other information concerning the IDVA.

