



ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

833 SOUTH SPRING STREET, SPRINGFIELD, IL 62704

June 27, 2024

RE: Illinois Veterans' Advisory Council (IVAC) Report

Dear Governor Pritzker and members of the General Assembly,

The Department of Veterans' Affairs Act (20 ILCS 2805/15) directs the Illinois Veterans' Advisory Council (IVAC) to report the following information to the Governor and the General Assembly:

- Report to the Governor and the General Assembly annually, describing the issues addressed and the actions taken by the council during the year, as well as any recommendations for future action.

On behalf of the IVAC, and pursuant to 20 ILCS 2805/15, we have enclosed the annual report for the Illinois Veterans' Advisory Council. If there are any questions about this report, please contact the IVAC Chairman, Keith Wetherell, at (217) 494-2907.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Terry Prince
Director

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Director's Letter

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) is pleased to present the Fiscal Year 2024 Illinois Veterans Advisory Council (IVAC) Annual Report. The perspectives of the IVAC committee members provide a unique lens into how we serve veterans. Our partnership makes us stronger and more connected. Thank you to Chairman Keith Wetherell and Vice-Chair Bob Tyler for their dedicated and innovative approach and leadership which produced interesting and productive dialogue. I continue to rely on IVAC's mentorship and guidance which has contributed to IDVA's success. Each of the council members bring a unique perspective and collectively we troubleshoot, brainstorm, and create strategies that reflect our united commitment to support Illinois veterans.

We have been on this journey together for over three years and the IVAC supported me from the beginning as IDVA developed and executed a Six-Point Plan. Your support continues when IDVA took a long hard look at the future and developed a four-year strategic plan to address the areas that would lead us to achieving our mission of positioning veterans to thrive in Illinois. With thousands of organizations serving veterans in Illinois, it is imperative that we collaborate to meet the diverse needs of our veterans, families, caregivers and survivors. This partnership exemplifies the success we can have when we work together.

Thank you to each member of the committee who volunteer their time to ensure that we develop solid legislative initiatives and creative strategies to support Illinois veterans. We treasure this partnership and recognize that its impact on the Agency's work and the lives of Illinois veterans.

I'm thrilled to be on the journey with all of you as we continue to ensure that veterans "thrive in Illinois!"

Sincerely,

Terry Prince, IDVA Director



Chairman's Report

The Illinois Veterans Advisory Council (IVAC) had a busy and productive Fiscal Year 2024. The IVAC is focused on specific issues related to veterans and is committed to finding new ways to make a positive impact on Illinois veterans, their families, and their communities. In September, the IVAC convened to thoroughly discuss the complex variables and issues associated with Veteran suicide. The committee also met in December to review the coordination between the various state agencies and their respective veterans' committees. Additionally, discussions were held on identifying veteran-specific legislation and policy changes. The goal was to ensure that all veterans stakeholders are educated on veteran-specific legislation issues. Finally, in June, the council met to address the various aspects of veterans' unemployment. These are three crucial issues that veterans and their families face on a daily basis. The IVAC will continue its research and discussions to find ways to improve this process and address other issues affecting Illinois veterans.

Looking ahead, we understand there is still much work to be done. In the coming fiscal year, the IVAC will focus on strengthening the implementation of Veteran friendly policies and laws, expanding our outreach efforts, and improving any neglected or nefarious Veterans issues as a whole. We will also continue to monitor emerging issues and adapt our strategies to meet the evolving needs of Illinois Veterans.

We would like to express our gratitude to each council member for their dedication, expertise, and unwavering commitment to serving veterans. We would also like to thank Director Prince and his staff for their unwavering support. Together we achieved meaningful progress, and our collective efforts will make a lasting impact on Illinois Veterans.

Sincerely,

Keith Wetherell
Chairman
Illinois Veterans Advisory Council

History of the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council

Pursuant to Public Act 100-10, effective June 30, 2017, the State of Illinois created the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council (IVAC). Part of IVAC's mission is to investigate the re-entry process for service members who return to civilian life after being engaged in an active theatre. The investigation shall include the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, homelessness, disabilities, and other issues the council finds relevant to the re-entry process. To accomplish this mission, IVAC has convened teams of experienced, professional veteran advocates, and community leaders to analyze major issue areas and develop strategic policy recommendations. IVAC's strategic policy recommendations are published annually in the IVAC Annual Report. In accordance with the Act, IVAC members include:

- Four members of the General Assembly appointed one each by the President of the Senate, the Minority Leader of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives
- Six veterans appointed by the Director of Veterans' Affairs
- One veteran appointed by the commander or president of each veterans service organization that is chartered by the federal government and by the State of Illinois and elects to appoint a member
- One person appointed by the Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard
- One person appointed by the Illinois Attorney General
- One person appointed by the Illinois Secretary of State
- One person appointed by the Director of the Illinois Department of Employment Security
- One person appointed by each military family organization that is chartered by the federal government

**ILLINOIS VETERANS ADVISORY COUNCIL
(FY 2024)**

Keith Wetherell, *Chairman, AMVETS*
Robert “Bob” Tyler, *Vice Chairman, MOAA*

GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

The Honorable Sue Rezin, *Illinois State Senator*
The Honorable Craig Wilcox, *Illinois State Senator*
The Honorable Dan Swanson, *Illinois State Representative*
The Honorable Lance Yednock, *Illinois State Representative*

EXTERNAL AGENCY APPOINTEES

Major General Richard Neely, *Illinois National Guard*
Shannon Yount, *Office of the Attorney General*
Jorge Eric Bermudez, *Illinois Department of Employment Security*

DIRECTOR’S APPOINTEES

Bill Wolff, *Veteran Advocate*
Stanley Olenjack, *Veteran Advocate*
Kevin Wathen, *Veteran Advocate*
Megan Everett, *Veteran Advocate*
Frank Gutierrez, *Veteran Advocate*
Vince Long, *Veteran Advocate*

VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Al Reynolds, *Disabled American Veterans*
Bruce Blackmer, *Marine Corps League*
Michael Peck, *The American Legion*
Dr. Jerry Field, *Jewish War Veterans*
Peggy Arick, *Blue Star Mothers of America*
Tim Kennedy, *Catholic War Veterans*
Joe Schaler, *Military Order of the Purple Heart*
Christa Hammers, *Veterans Assistance Commission*
John “Dutch” DeGroot, *Veterans of Foreign Wars*
Roy L. Dolgos, *Vietnam Veterans of America*
Lee Lopez, *Military Order of the World Wars*
Ray Dieter, *Reserve Organization of America*

Veteran Suicide

Veteran suicide is a major public health concern in Illinois, mirroring a larger national crisis. Veterans, who frequently encounter distinct challenges like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and struggles in transitioning to civilian life, face a higher risk of suicide compared to the general population. In Illinois, various factors contribute to this troubling trend:

- **Mental Health Challenges:** Many veterans struggle with mental health conditions stemming from their service experiences. PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are prevalent among this population.
- **Access to Care:** While there are numerous resources available, including the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals and clinics, access to adequate mental health care can be inconsistent. Barriers include stigma, long wait times, and geographic distance from VA facilities.
- **Isolation and Transition:** Transitioning from military to civilian life can be challenging. Veterans often experience a sense of isolation and lack of purpose after leaving the structured environment of the military, which can exacerbate feelings of hopelessness.
- **Economic Factors:** Financial stressors, such as unemployment or underemployment, can significantly impact veterans' mental health. Economic instability can increase the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors.
- **Community Support and Resources:** Various initiatives and organizations in Illinois aim to support veterans, such as local VA offices, non-profit organizations, and community support groups. Efforts are being made to improve outreach, increase awareness, and provide timely intervention for those in need.

Efforts to address veteran suicide in Illinois include enhancing mental health services, promoting community engagement, reducing stigma associated with seeking help, and ensuring that veterans have access to the resources they need. Collaboration between government agencies, non-profits, and community organizations is crucial to developing effective strategies and providing comprehensive support for veterans at risk of suicide.



Synergy Between Veterans' Stakeholders

Having continuity among veteran committees associated with Illinois state agencies, Veterans' Service Organizations, and all other stakeholders is essential for several reasons:

- **Consistent Advocacy and Support:** Continuity ensures that there is an ongoing, reliable advocacy for veterans' needs. Veteran committees play a crucial role in identifying issues, proposing solutions, and lobbying for necessary changes. Consistent leadership and membership allow for a deeper understanding of veterans' issues and sustained advocacy efforts.
- **Policy Implementation:** Continuity helps in the seamless implementation of policies and programs. Veteran committees often work closely with state agencies to design and implement initiatives that support veterans. Continuity ensures that these initiatives are carried out effectively and are not disrupted by frequent changes in leadership or membership.
- **Institutional Knowledge:** Committees with long-term members retain valuable institutional knowledge. This knowledge includes understanding past challenges, what strategies have been effective, and what areas need improvement. Such historical perspective is crucial for making informed decisions and building on past successes.
- **Trust and Relationships:** Building trust and strong working relationships with veterans, state agencies, and other stakeholders takes time. Continuity fosters these relationships, leading to better collaboration and communication. Veterans are more likely to engage with committees and seek help if they see familiar and trusted faces.
- **Efficient Resource Utilization:** Continuity allows for more efficient use of resources. New members require time to get up to speed, which can slow down progress and lead to duplicated efforts. Long-term members can focus resources on advancing ongoing projects and initiatives rather than spending time on orientation and training.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Long-term committees are better positioned to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of programs and services. They can track progress over time, identify trends, and make necessary adjustments to improve outcomes for veterans.
- **Crisis Response:** In times of crisis, such as natural disasters or economic downturns, continuity in veteran committees ensures a swift and coordinated response. Experienced members can quickly mobilize resources, provide support, and address emergent needs effectively.
- **Building Legacy and Momentum:** Consistent leadership and membership help build a legacy of service and a momentum for continuous improvement. Long-term committees can set and achieve long-term goals, creating a lasting positive impact on the veteran community.

In summary, it is crucial to maintain continuity in veteran committees associated with Illinois state agencies. This is essential for effective advocacy, policy implementation, resource utilization, and overall support for veterans. It ensures stability, fosters trust, and enables sustained progress in addressing the unique challenges faced by veterans.

Illinois Veterans Advisory Council Legislation FY-2024

The last session of the General Assembly accomplished groundbreaking legislation that sets a model for congress in providing protection for veterans and their families. The passage of SB3479 Amendment to the Consumer Fraud Act provides penalties for those who target veterans with deceptive practices.

SB3479 Consumer Fraud (Veterans)

Amends provisions of the Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act concerning deceptive practices targeting veterans and military members. Changes the definition of “veteran or military benefits services” to any services offered or provided to a veteran, military member, or family member who is entitled to receive benefits under federal, State, or local law, policy, or practice as a result of, at least in part, qualifying military service. Such services include assistance, consulting or coaching in the preparation, presentation, or prosecution of claims or other attempts to obtain benefits, increase benefits, or appeal a decision related to obtaining or increasing benefits. Adds a veterans services disclosure to be made by any person providing veteran or military benefits services. Makes it an unlawful practice for any person providing veteran or military benefits services to fail at the outset of the business relationship to clearly provide, both orally and in writing, veterans services disclosures when veteran or military benefits services are provided in exchange for any financial compensation, benefit or thing of value. Makes other changes.

SB2751 Disabled Veterans Permits

Amends the Counties Code, Township Code, and Illinois Municipal Code. Provides that a veteran with a disability or the veteran’s caregiver shall not be charged any building permit fee for improvements to the residence of the veteran with a disability if the improvements are required to accommodate a disability of the veteran. Provides that the applications, forms, and other paperwork required to obtain a building permit must still be submitted. Limits the concurrent exercise of home rule powers. Effective January 1, 2025.

Senate Floor Amendment No. 1

Replaces everything after the enacting clause. Reinserts the provisions of the introduced bill with the following changes. Requires a veteran or caregiver to provide proof of veteran status and attest to the fact that the improvements to the residence are required to accommodate the veteran’s disability. Provides that proof of veteran status is to be construed liberally, and veteran status shall include service in the Armed Forces of the United States, National Guard, or the reserves of the Armed Forces of the United States. Provides that what constitutes proof of veteran status shall be determined by the county, township, or municipality. Prohibits the Illinois Department of Veterans’ Affairs from adjudicating any dispute arising under the provisions. Effective January 1, 2025.

HB4757 Disabled Veterans Benefit Notice

Amends the Department of Veterans’ Affairs Act. Provides that the Department of Veterans Affairs shall create, and the Department of Labor shall make available, at no cost, a veterans and service members’ benefits, services, and protections poster. Requires the poster to include, but not be limited to, information regarding free veterans’ benefits and services provided by the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs and other veterans service organizations, tax benefits, the Illinois veteran driver’s license and non-driver veteran identification card, and Illinois protections for

survivors of sexual violence in the military. Requires the poster to also include contact information for the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs; and the Veterans Crisis Line.

House Floor Amendment No. 1

Replaces everything after the enacting clause. Amends the Property Tax Code. In a Section granting a homestead exemption to veterans with disabilities, provides that property that is used as a qualified residence by a veteran who was a member of the United States Armed Forces during World War II is exempt from taxation regardless of the veteran’s level of disability. Provides that a veteran who qualifies as a result of his or her service in World War II need not reapply for the exemption. Makes changes concerning service-connected disabilities. Makes changes concerning surviving spouses. Effective immediately.

House Floor Amendment No. 2

Makes changes to the bill as amended by House Amendment No. 1 to provide that provisions concerning service-connected disabilities apply beginning in taxable year 2023 (in the amended bill, 2024). Provides that provisions concerning veterans of World War II apply beginning in taxable year 2024 (in the amended bill, 2023). Makes a conforming change.

Passage of these bills continue to make Illinois a leading veteran friendly state. We continue to support an urge passage of the following bills.

Recommendations

SB2674 -Procurement Code (Veterans)

Amends the Illinois Procurement Code. Provides that the certification of service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses and veteran-owned small businesses is an exclusive power and function of the State. Denies home rule powers.

Illinois Veterans Re-entry and Unemployment

Illinois is actively working to combat veterans' unemployment through a variety of initiatives and programs designed to support veterans in finding and retaining meaningful employment. Here are some of the key strategies and efforts:

- **Veterans' Employment Preference:** Illinois has laws in place that give veterans preference in hiring for state jobs. This preference helps veterans secure employment within state agencies and departments.
- **Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES):** IDES offer a range of services specifically for veterans, including job search assistance, resume writing workshops, interview preparation, and job fairs. They also have Veteran Employment Representatives who provide personalized help to veterans.
- **Illinois Joining Forces (IJF):** This statewide, public-private network aims to improve the coordination and delivery of services to veterans. They focus on areas such as employment, education, housing, and wellness, ensuring veterans have access to comprehensive support.
- **Illinois Job-Link:** This online job board connects job seekers with employers. Veterans can create profiles, upload resumes, and search for job openings tailored to their skills and experiences. Employers can also specifically search for veteran candidates.
- **Veteran-Owned Small Business (VOSB) and Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB) Programs:** These programs encourage state agencies to do business with veteran-owned businesses. This not only supports veteran entrepreneurs but also creates job opportunities within these businesses.
- **Educational Benefits:** Illinois offers various educational benefits to veterans, such as the Illinois Veterans' Grant and the Illinois National Guard Grant, which cover tuition and mandatory fees at Illinois state-supported colleges, universities, and community colleges. These programs help veterans gain the education and skills needed for the civilian job market.
- **Employer Outreach and Engagement:** The state actively engages with employers to promote the hiring of veterans. Initiatives like the Illinois Hires Heroes Consortium encourage employers to adopt veteran-friendly hiring practices and recognize businesses that demonstrate a commitment to hiring veterans.
- **Translating Military Skills to Civilian Jobs:** Programs and workshops are available to help veterans translate their military skills and experiences into civilian job qualifications. This includes assistance with resume writing and interview skills tailored to the civilian job market.
- **Networking and Mentorship:** Illinois supports networking events and mentorship programs that connect veterans with industry professionals and potential employers. These connections can provide valuable job leads, career advice, and support during the job search process.

By implementing these and other initiatives, IVAC aims to reduce veteran unemployment, helping veterans' transition smoothly into the civilian workforce and ensuring they have access to meaningful and stable employment opportunities.

Conclusion

The Illinois Veterans Advisory Council's annual report serves as a testament to the unwavering commitment and dedication of all those involved in supporting and advocating for our state's veterans. Throughout the past fiscal year, the Council has made significant strides in addressing the unique challenges faced by veterans and their families, while also working towards enhancing their overall well-being.

The report highlights the IVAC's multifaceted approach, combining legislative advocacy, community engagement, and collaborative efforts with various stakeholders. By fostering partnerships with legislators, state agencies, veterans service organizations, and private companies, the IVAC has been able to create comprehensive programs and initiatives that cater to the diverse needs of Illinois veterans. The IVAC will continue to ensure Illinois Veterans' needs are being met and to ensure their service and sacrifices continue to be appreciated and recognized.

The IVAC met on:
September 9th, 2023
December 13th, 2023
June 12th, 2024

To access the minutes for each meeting, please visit <https://veterans.illinois.gov/>. Click on the **About Us** tab and select **Committees/Task Forces** from the dropdown. From there, you will see 'Illinois Veterans' Advisory Council where you can access all IVAC meeting dates, agendas, minutes, and annual reports.

Special thanks to the IDVA staff, Director Prince, Rep Kifowit, Rep Swanson, Rep Yednock, Vice-Chairman Bob Tyler, all the council members, Veteran Service Organizations, and all the other supporters who steadfastly remain dedicated to supporting our veterans in every possible way.

We also would like to thank and remember our lost members, Mr. Joe Schaler and Mr. Stanley Olenjack, thank you for your service and dedication to veterans, Rest In Peace.