

Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs

# STRATEGIC PLAN

2023-2027



ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF  
VETERANS AFFAIRS





## ★ LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR


Since being appointed by Governor JB Pritzker as Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) nearly four years ago, it has been a privilege to serve the nearly 600,000 Veterans and their families across Illinois. As a 31-year Veteran of the United States Navy and retired Hospital Corpsman, I am excited to work alongside the 1,300 dedicated employees of IDVA, while teaming up with our partners at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), sister agencies within state government, Illinois Joining Forces, Illinois Veterans' Advisory Council, Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions, and veterans' service organizations all over Illinois, to elevate IDVA's model of veteran-centric service. Together, we are all committed to positioning veterans to "thrive in Illinois" through employment, health care, housing, education, and other support to build a strong foundation for today and their future.

Back in 2021, IDVA recognized the challenges and opportunities facing the Agency. Drawing on the experiences and recommendations of multiple stakeholders, we developed a six-point plan to build a better future for IDVA. This included restructuring our senior leadership to ensure we brought out the best in our team. We hired experts in key roles, enhanced department technology, put infection control front and center, and implemented programs that improved culture and communication.

We employ top-level professionals as leaders within the organization. Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn, a USMC veteran who has served at IDVA for over 19 years, provides institutional knowledge to support the agency with an overarching strategic vision and operational excellence. Our Chief of Staff, Jassen Strokosch, also a Marine veteran, oversees the agency's day-to-day operations and strategically connects each department while managing arising crises. Angela Simmons, the Senior Home Administrator, the daughter of an Army Veteran, leads the five Veterans' Homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy to ensure that our care and policies are consistent at each home. Our Field Services division is led by Army Veteran Mark Patterson, who has served at IDVA for over 32 years!

Open dialogue is integral to success. We are consistently visiting the Illinois Veterans' Homes and communicating directly with the staff – and more importantly, encouraging them to communicate with us. In 2023, our union partners at AFSCME ratified the largest contract ever with the State of Illinois, that resulted in a 19% pay increase, over four years, and a \$1200 stipend for each union member. Governor Pritzker's administration has authorized cost of living increases for our merit comp employees and the state offers incredible opportunities for advancement. This, along with a renewed emphasis on encouraging, supporting, and thanking our employees, allows us to attract the best talent in order to continue to serve those who served.





IDVA constantly upgrades technology for employees across the organization including new laptop computers, cell phones, and other equipment to streamline and modernize their work. We are proud of these improvements and recognize that we must continue this effort. An organization that communicates effectively is more successful and fosters a happier and more productive working environment.

In the IDVA Annual Report, we present a list of accomplishments achieved and recognize many of our outstanding staff. In 2024, for the second year in a row, we requested the largest IDVA budget in history and were granted these funds by the legislature and Governor JB Pritzker. This allows us to build on our successes by hiring additional Veteran Service Officers who work one-on-one with veterans and provide outreach in the community at resource fairs, programs, and ceremonies. We are aggressively hiring staff for the five Veterans' Homes so that we are equipped to care for even more veterans. The State Approving Agency had its most successful year yet, providing integral educational benefits to veterans and their families. Lastly, we launched a new logo to better connect with veterans.

The Veterans' Home at Quincy is preparing to move veterans into the new domiciliary and skilled nursing home that are part of a \$300 million construction project. The Veterans' Homes at Anna, LaSalle, and Manteno also underwent significant renovations to enhance their environments.

We continue to focus on veterans who have been ignored, underserved, and perhaps, even marginalized. This includes women, LGBTQ plus, incarcerated, homeless, minority, and veterans with less than stellar military discharges. The IDVA Women Veterans Program continues to grow while we also serve at the foundation of the Governor's Challenge, a crusade to end veterans' suicide and participate in the Illinois Interagency Task Force on Homelessness.

Finally, while it is important to look back on our successes, only some of which are captured above, we know we need to raise the bar even further. The following pages will provide an overview of how IDVA will further enhance our delivery of service to veterans and their families over the next several years. As the demand for services continues to grow, we no doubt face enormous challenges, but one need look no further than our dedicated employees, who care for our veterans, day in and day out, to feel incredible gratitude for their work today and optimism about things to come.

Thanks to all of you for supporting our efforts. We look forward to continuing to make a difference for our veterans, their families, our communities, and one another.

Sincerely,

  
IDVA Director



# ★ IDVA MISSION, VISION, AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

## **Mission**

As an expression of our gratitude for their service to our country, we are committed to empowering veterans and their families to thrive in Illinois. Every encounter we have with them is met with dignity and respect, as we understand the challenges of military service and the lifelong impact it has on their lives.

## **Vision**

Illinois is the destination of choice for veterans and a national leader in veteran advocacy and services. IDVA sets the standard for connecting veterans and their families with all the benefits and privileges they earned to empower them to thrive.



## **Guiding Principles** "TEAM IDVA"

### **Teamwork**

Our diverse and well-trained staff collaborate to achieve the mission of serving veterans and their families.

### **Excellence**

We are experts in veteran care and are deeply committed to providing veteran-centered service through attention to their individual circumstances and dedication to helping them achieve their long- and short-term goals.

### **Accountability**

We provide world-class care in our homes, superior outreach, service to the community, and sound stewardship of taxpayer resources. We listen to the challenges and issues of veterans and are committed to enhancing and improving our services and how we deliver them.

### **Motivation**

Our highly motivated professionals engage with public and private organizations who serve veterans and their families. We develop and adopt innovative ideas by utilizing a "one team, one fight" approach to share best practices and deliver on our promise to serve those who served.



# ★ TEAM IDVA PRIORITIES

## Priority #1: Our People

IDVA offers meaningful work to those interested in serving veterans and presents a wide variety of opportunities in its Residential Homes, Field Locations, and Central Offices. We are a supportive, diverse, and inclusive Agency which fosters positive employee morale and encourages high performance. This environment facilitates achieving the mission of ensuring that veterans thrive in Illinois.

IDVA action areas:

- Circulate employee satisfaction surveys to get immediate feedback on areas where we can improve across IDVA
- Lead all agencies in our DEI efforts to attract and retain the best people to serve our veterans
- Fill all open staff positions
- Reinstitute Employee of the Month at all Veterans' Homes, quarterly at Field Services and Headquarters, and annually for the entire agency
- Prepare and administer meaningful employee evaluations
- Establish a leadership training academy for managers
- Enhance our workforce through robust talent development
- Reduce overall discipline and recognize high performance
- Establish an IDVA-specific employee health and wellness program
- Successfully implement the State of Illinois Human Capital Management (HCM) system to modernize our employee pay and benefit systems

*“We understand that the reputation of IDVA is defined by our most valuable assets, our people. We will lead by example and ensure that every employee is valued for their contribution. Because, when our employees flourish, Illinois veterans and their families thrive.”*

*– Director Prince*





## Priority #2: Veteran Experience

IDVA is centered around the veteran in its Residential Homes and those seeking support in our Field Offices. The Central Office supports the overall work of the Agency. The Veteran Services Officers (VSOs) located across the state are positioned to assist the veteran in accessing their earned benefits. The Agency continues to improve access to the VSOs and upgrade its systems and processes to provide excellent customer service. To offer world-class care in the five Veterans' Homes, IDVA stays apprised of new methods of care and medical technology.

IDVA action areas:

- Establish digital access to all IDVA services
- Streamline Veterans' Homes admission process and increase census
- Increase virtual access to VSO services
- Strive for five star ranking comparative to "Gold Star" accreditation by the Joint Commission and U.S. News and World Reports' "Best Nursing Homes" ranking
- Raise Illinois into the top five of all states in USDVA Compensation and Pension
- Partner with federal, state, and local partners to amplify the level of services available with a special emphasis on historically underserved or ignored veterans
- Establish a veteran peer-to-peer network and pop up "welcome home" events across the state

"Nothing is more important to me than ensuring veterans and their families have access to a modern network of services, backed by dedicated professionals, who always go the extra mile. We have a responsibility to build a level of trust that is often seen in military units where each one of our veterans know we will absolutely have their backs. Veterans, families, and survivors are our North Star, our reason for existence, and we will leave no stone unturned to help them with the opportunity to thrive in Illinois."

– Director Prince





### Priority #3: Operational Excellence

IDVA will deliver the highest level of service to veterans in Illinois through systems that are effective, efficient, and ethical. Working with our partners, we will constantly improve our processes, procedures, and policies while employing the latest technology to better equip our team to deliver high quality services. Our operations will be the example for all others to follow.

IDVA action areas:

- Increase use of data to drive decision making
- Develop and execute dashboard of IDVA departmental goals
- Publish regular productivity updates on our website
- Initiate project management software to improve inefficiencies
- Balance fiscal budget with focus on veteran outcomes and staff morale
- Update policies, procedures, and standard operating procedures
- Strive for a clean agency audit
- Strengthen collaborative relationships with our partners at Illinois Joining Forces, Illinois Association of County Veteran Assistance Commission, local and state Veteran Service Organizations, Illinois Veterans Advisory Council, and elected officials

“Not a single naval vessel goes to sea unless the crew are highly trained and policies and procedures are followed. IDVA has a tremendous level of responsibility as we serve veterans and their families, often in their most vulnerable moments.

Our mission requires attention to every detail as we are dealing with a population who has earned our respect and dedication. The IDVA team will set the example for all agencies, not just in Illinois, but across the Nation.”

– Director Prince



