



State of Illinois
Department of Veterans' Affairs

Illinois Veterans Advisory Council

Annual Report 2022



★ Table of Contents

Letter from the Director	2
Letter from IVAC Chairman	3
History of the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council	4
Illinois Veteran Advisory Council	5
Recommended Legislation	6
Women Veterans	7
Veteran Homelessness	8
Veterans Re-entry and Employment	9
Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program	10
Conclusion	10



★ Letter from the Director



The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) is pleased to present the Fiscal Year 2022 Illinois Veterans Advisory Council (IVAC) Annual Report. I am grateful for the partnership with IVAC as together, we have addressed key initiatives to ensure that veterans and their families thrive in Illinois. It has been an absolute privilege serving as IDVA Director for the past year and I am so proud of the team and our dedicated partners as we have implemented (and completed) my Six-Point Plan for the future of IDVA.

Key leadership roles were filled including Chief of Staff, Senior Home Administrator, Women Veterans Coordinator, Senior Infection Preventionist, Legislative Liaison, Public Information Officer, and an administrator for the Veterans' Home at LaSalle. Having served in their roles for several months, their contributions are evident and will continue to impact the mission of IDVA. Improved communication made all this possible by enhancing dialogue which we've achieved through a robust open-door policy, agency-wide email accounts, and my weekly "Tuesdays with Terry" message. It is imperative that we have multiple layers of communication so that IDVA employees in our veterans' homes, field offices and headquarters buildings are well connected.

On January 20th, 2022, we were proud to open the Illinois Veterans' Home at Chicago, a beautiful 200-bed facility that currently houses 19 residents. Infection control remains a priority at each of the five veterans' homes where we have instituted strict protocols, procedures, and put policies in place to prevent infiltration and mitigate spread. We welcomed a new IDVA Infection Preventionist who is working closely with each home and the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) to guide them in adhering to the systems in place to protect veterans and staff, and, working with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA), are in the process of developing infection control committees within each home.

Over the past year, we have strengthened existing policies and introduced new ones to address the evolving needs of our employees and how to protect their work/life balance. We did this through regular "Leader Rounding" certificates, handwritten thank you notes and reinstatement of the Employee of the Quarter and Year program. We are also updating our technology across the organization, particularly analyzing potential systems to modernize safety within the homes.

These initiatives have positioned the department to better serve Illinois' veterans. IVAC's contributions provided us with better perspectives to assess and elevate our work. We look forward to the continued partnership and are grateful to all of the volunteer members of IVAC for their service and commitment to Illinois' veterans and their families.

Sincerely,

Terry Prince

IDVA Director

★ Chairman's Report



Illinois' veterans and their families will see Fiscal Year 2022 as an improvement in their lives. The Illinois General Assembly passed several bills that directly affected the lives of veterans in Illinois. I am particularly proud of House Bill 4682, submitted at the recommendation of the IVAC by Representative Swanson and Senator Wilcox so that not-for-profits who provide behavioral health services can apply for grants under the Veterans' Cash grant program. This bill will improve the lives of our veterans and their families as they seek mental health services.

We all can take pride in Senate Joint Resolution 28, which named the Illinois portion of U.S. Highway 20 as the National Medal of Honor Highway. This initiative began in Oregon and now runs across the country through Massachusetts. Look for signs to be placed along the route and a formal ceremony later this summer to show all Illinois residents and those that pass through our state that Illinois honors its heroes, and that freedom is

not free.

The advisory council has taken the stand that veterans at the local level know best what assistance to provide to veterans in their community by their veterans' assistance commission (VAC). However, veterans must be diligent in their participation to ensure the needs of the veterans' community are met.

With the world situation in change and a growing dependence on our nation's defenders, (Active, Guard, Reserve and their families), we must continue our mission to serve Illinois veterans and their families. They defended us, now we must defend them.

Respectfully,

Michael P. Peck

Colonel, U.S. Army

Retired

★ 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, VAC 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

Michael Peck, Chairman, Military Order of the World Wars
Dr. Jerry Field, Vice Chairman, Jewish War Veterans

GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

The Honorable Sue Rezin
The Honorable Tony Munoz
The Honorable Dan Swanson
The Honorable Lance Yednock

APPOINTED BY

Illinois State Senator
Illiois State Senator
Illinois State Representative
Illinois State Representative

EXTERNAL AGENCY APPOINTEES

Major General Richard Neely
Thomas Banning
Gregory J. Curran
Jorge Eric Bermudez

Illinois National Guard
Office of the Attorney General
Office of the Secretary of State
Illinois Department of Employment Security

DIRECTOR'S APPOINTEES

Bill Wolff
Renysha Brown
Kevin Wathen
Megan Everett
Frank Gutierrez
Vince Long

Veteran Advocate
Veteran Advocate
Veteran Advocate
Veteran Advocate
Veteran Advocate
Veteran Advocate

VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS/AFFILIATES

Al Reynolds
Stanley Olenjack
Keith Wetherell
Peggy Arick
Tim Kennedy
Joe Schaler
John Murray
Justin Miller
Roy L. Dolgos
Bob Tyler
Lou Myers
Myron Kirby

Disabled American Veterans
Marine Corps League
AMVETS
Blue Star Mothers of America
Catholic War Veterans
Military Order of the Purple Heart
Veterans Assistance Commission
Veterans of Foreign Wars
Vietnam Veterans of America
Military Officers Association of America
Reserve Organization of America
The American Legion

★ Illinois Veterans Advisory Council Legislation FY-2022

The Illinois General Assembly was in session from January to early April of this year. Almost 40 bills affecting veterans, servicemembers, or their families moved through the legislative process. Several key pieces of legislation were signed into law. Veterans in Illinois that are 100% disabled, permanent and total, no longer need to reapply annually for property tax exemption. An Illinois National Guard initiative now expands protections for survivors of sexual violence in the military. Legislation offering clarification on eligibility for scholarship programs for veterans' dependents passed unanimously. These changes will have a significant impact on the veteran and servicemember communities, and the IVAC notes the importance of this legislation.

For its part, the IVAC, in conjunction with IDVA, formally introduced and supported two initiatives:

HB 4682, sponsored by Representative Swanson and Senator Wilcox, will amend the Illinois Lottery Law, specifically the section on Veterans' Cash scratch-off tickets. Under this section, the funds from Veterans' Cash scratch-off tickets can be deposited into the Illinois Veterans Assistance Fund. IDVA is then allowed to issue these funds in the forms of Veterans' Cash grants. Under current law, eligibility for a grant requires an organization to meet one of six specific purposes. HB 4682 updates this. First, it strikes "PTSD" and changes it to "behavioral health." This change will allow IDVA to make grants to organizations that address veterans' "behavioral health" instead of being limited to PTSD alone. Second, it adds new language, creating a seventh category for "veterans' emergency financial assistance" so that IDVA can make grants for that as well. This bill passed both chambers and has been sent to the Governor.

SJR 28, sponsored by Representative Moeller and Senate President Harmon, designates the entire portion of U.S. Highway 20 in Illinois, beginning at the Illinois/Iowa border and ending at the Illinois/Indiana border, as the "Illinois Medal of Honor Highway" to honor current and future Medal of Honor recipients from Illinois. Illinois was one of a few remaining states along U.S. Highway 20 that had not been part of this initiative, and SJR 28 rectifies this. SJR 28 was adopted by both houses.

**Part of U.S. Highway 20 in Illinois already has a designation for Ulysses S. Grant. IDOT confirmed that multiple designations are allowed, and that U.S. Highway 20 will have both.*



According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there are nearly two million women veterans living in the United States today. While women veterans do not make up a majority of the overall veteran population, they are the fastest growing demographic in the veteran community. In 2000, four percent of the veteran population were women. By 2040, the veteran population is projected to be close to 18 percent women. Of the two million women veterans across America, Illinois is proud to recognize the estimated 49,000 women veterans who call Illinois home.

In August of 2015, Illinois passed legislation creating the Division of Women Veterans Affairs within the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs to serve as an advocate for women veterans in recognition of the unique issues facing women veterans. In the summer of 2020, the IDVA Women Veterans Coordinator position became vacant and remained unfilled until September 2021. The IDVA Director recruited Kourtney Hopkins, a U.S. Army Veteran of the War in Iraq, to lead the Women Veterans Program. Through community engagement, the IDVA Women Veterans Program Coordinator partners with local, state, national, and federal organizations to establish a full-bodied outreach program to address the needs of women veterans and develop networks for support. Over the next fiscal year, Ms. Hopkins will continue to focus on fundamental goals to successfully revitalize the IDVA Women Veteran's Program including:

1. Identify and define the women veteran community within the state
2. Develop information relevant to women veterans' issues
3. Develop resources to facilitate networking within the women veteran community

The IDVA Women Veterans Program Coordinator appreciates the support of the IVAC and hearing directly from the various veteran service organizations throughout the state on the needs of the women veterans in their communities.

★ Illinois Veteran Homelessness



There are hundreds of homeless veterans on Illinois' streets every day. Moreover, almost seven percent of Illinois' veterans live in poverty. As a result, these poverty-stricken veterans often experience substance use disorders, behavioral health problems, and a general lack of support for their unique circumstances. Many veterans struggling economically could have better outcomes by receiving assistance before becoming homeless. Unfortunately, once their situation becomes dire, it is often challenging for them to overcome these obstacles, and these struggling veterans often find themselves in a perpetual fight for survival. Our besieged veterans deserve better.

At the Federal level, Veteran's Administration's (VA) HUD VASH Program, which subsidizes housing for Veterans, is one major program which has been successful. An additional VA program that is used, is the VA's Supportive Services Veterans Families (SSVF) which also assists Veterans in obtaining stable housing.

Prioritizing services, such as job retention, job placement, substance use disorder counseling, behavioral health services, support groups, proper housing, rent and mortgage programs, and transition services is imperative. Focusing on prevention is priority for the IVAC. The following are key areas of focus:

- Prevention-Establish a fund that can be used for rent, utilities, and food assistance
- Outreach and Assessment-funding for stand downs and change and recovery programs
- Emergency Shelter-provide personal care items, food, and clothing
- Transitional Housing-provide a network of services that promote like skills and reintegration
- Supportive Permanent Housing-a program based around case management and oversight
- Affordable Housing-provide moving assistance, childcare, and services that offset the housing expenses

★ Illinois Veterans Re-entry and Employment

Currently, the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES), in partnership with the State Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act Agencies (WIOA), participates in the U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) grant funded Transition Assistance Program workshops at both Naval Training Center, Great Lakes and Scott Air Force Base. Jobs for Veterans, State grant staff, employment services, and WIOA partners give a 5–10-minute overview on the services provided at their American Job Centers, encouraging veterans to stop by or to connect to them at one of their relocation sites.

IDES partners with the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) grantees--primarily in Illinois, but also in several bordering metro areas like St. Louis, MO, and Davenport, IA. HVRP is an employment focused competitive grant program of the U.S. Department of Labor - Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) and is the only federal grant to focus exclusively on competitive employment for homeless veterans. Through the collaboration of IDES and the American Job Centers, we provide a wide range of employment and training services to assist our veterans to enter the civilian workforce while earning meaningful and family sustaining wages.

Partnerships with various Veterans Service Organizations like our County Veterans' Assistance Commissions provide Veterans with VA Benefits, financial, rental, and utility assistance have assisted IDES Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists with mitigating Significant Barriers to Employment of our veterans most in need.

IDES created the DES.MyVetRep@illinois.gov email address which is located on the IDVA and IDES websites. Military service members, veterans, or spouses can send an email related to employment or employment assistance to this address and receive a response. Employers can use this email address as well when seeking to employ veterans.

IDES conducts outreach within both business and supportive service communities to advocate on behalf of our servicemembers, veterans, and spouses. Additionally, IDES conducts in-reach at thirteen Illinois Department of Correction Centers throughout Illinois to incarcerated veterans.

IDES and WIOA partners are available to assist servicemembers, veterans and spouses at any career transition point to include connections to many federal, state, county, and local services as well as Veteran Service Organizations. IDES is working with local unions on apprenticeship programs, such as Chicago-HIRE 360 and Utility Workers Military Assistance Program (UMAP) – Chicago.

All new job orders posted on IllinoisJobLink.com (IJL) have a 48-hour veteran priority in referral, IJL provides matches to employers with veterans for the first 24 hours after an order is posted. Other covered persons (spouses) are included in the list for the next 24 hours.

IVAC recommends the following:

- 1) IVAC urges IDVA to request a list of those Transitioning Service Members (TSMs) indicating their intent to return to Illinois from DOD. This would allow the IDVA and the WIOA partners (IDES, DCEO, DHS, and Illinois Community College Board) an opportunity to connect to the TSMs early to initiate both VA Benefits and Employment Assistance.
- 2) IVAC urges the Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Labor (DOL) to permit establishing an American Job Center on Great Lakes Naval Base, Scott Air Force Base, and Camp Lincoln in Springfield. (Note: Joint Base Lewis McCord (in Washington State) has an American Job Center and is doing very well serving TSMs and spouses.)
- 3) Veterans are encouraged to participate in the DOD SkillBridge program as an opportunity for Service members to gain valuable civilian work experience through specific industry training, or apprenticeships during the last 180 days of service. SkillBridge connects Service members with industry partners in real-world job experiences.

★ Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program

The Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program (IVTP) assesses the strengths and needs of veteran offenders within 18 months of release. IDES Veterans Representatives go to facilities to complete assessments. Additionally, IDVA visits the facilities to bring veterans up to date on their benefits and to assist them with their verification of service. The verification of services is essential to these individuals in obtaining various needs such as short-term housing, special employment programs and health services. Once the assessments have been completed, the IDES representatives hold group classes to educate incarcerated veterans on how to obtain benefits and find steady employment.

The program is currently offered at 14 Department of Corrections facilities: Big Muddy River, Centralia, Danville, Decatur, Dixon, East Moline, Lincoln, Pinckneyville, Robinson, Shawnee, Southwestern, Taylorville, Vandalia, and Vienna. IDES Veteran Representatives present workshops geared to training in how to:

- Write a resume
- Interview
- Overcome the felony conviction
- Dress for success
- Obtain VA benefits
- Apply for a job
- Keep a job
- Housing needs (critical needs only)
- Locating IDES veteran representative

Partnerships with agencies include; The State of Illinois State Appellate Defender's Office, the Small Business Association and the Veteran's Outreach Program. Some of the information and services provided include:

- Expungement of records, sealing of records, pardons and Certificate of Relief of Disability Information
- Fidelity Bonding, Federal Bonding, Work Opportunity Tax Credit and Veteran's Services available at the IDES Offices
- Federal & State Services/benefit to which they are entitled

★ Conclusion

Although the past year has had continued challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, IVAC remained dedicated to its mission of advocating for Illinois' veterans. COVID protocols were maintained, and quarterly meetings were held virtually via the WebEx platform, allowing continued collaboration throughout the state with little disruption.

Quarterly meetings were held:

- September 8, 2021
- December 8, 2021
- March 9, 2022
- June 8, 2022

To access the minutes for each meeting, please visit www2.illinois.gov/veterans. 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.

Over the next fiscal year, IVAC will remain committed to advocating for the unique needs of Illinois' veterans and their families to ensure they have the resources they need and that their unique and changing concerns are addressed.

For more information about the Department's programs and services, please contact:

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