



# VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 6, Issue 2 ★ February 2026



## ★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

February is a critical month for Illinois as State agency budgets are presented to Governor JB Pritzker and the general assembly. The IDVA Fiscal Team assessed our needs and goals and created a budget that allocates resources responsibly, while also allowing room for IDVA to expand its reach and services. Our budget highlighted our success stories from the past year as enduring proof of the Agency's diligence in directing resources to serve veterans at the highest level.

For FY2026, we requested \$258 million, an increase of 7.2% from FY2025. This modest increase supports our continued goal of elevating services to veterans. Our strategic plan includes increasing critical staff, ensuring we provide appropriate supplies to the Homes with ongoing cost increases, adding clinical and educational programs for CNAs, and expanding care to veterans.

We are grateful to Governor JB Pritzker, the Illinois General Assembly, and the people of Illinois who demonstrate their dedication to Illinois veterans by providing us with the funding to be resourceful and innovative to ensure veterans thrive in Illinois.

The biggest example was the opening of the domiciliary and long-term care buildings at the Veterans' Home at Quincy. This \$300 million "Rebuild Illinois" project was the crown jewel of IDVA's intention of providing our veteran homes residents with unmatched care in a beautiful setting, while demonstrating the state's ongoing commitment to the well-being of veterans in our care. Collectively, we welcomed 316 new residents into the State Veterans Homes while providing long-term nursing home care for nearly 1,000 veterans. To learn more about getting care at one of our Veterans Homes, please visit our website at [illinois.veterans.gov](https://illinois.veterans.gov).

The IDVA Veterans Service Officers deployed across the state conducting nearly 22,00 in-person telephonic interviews with veterans. This resulted in almost 24,000 federal benefit awards netting \$617 million in VA disability compensation. Each year, the VSOs increase their reach, and we anticipate this to grow with the addition of new VSOs to our staff.

In this edition of *Veterans Connections*, you will learn about resources to obtain G.I. Bill® benefits, Veterans Cash Grants, IDVA job opportunities, and more.

Thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

Sincerely,

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



*Leadership of the Health and Human Services portfolio present their 2027 Budget.*

## National Association of State Approving Agencies Conference

The G.I. Bill® is a transformative benefit for veterans and their families, providing education and training benefits to active duty, Selected Reserve, National Guard members, and their families. To facilitate obtaining these earned benefits, each state employs a State Approving Agency (SAA) which approves college and non-college degree programs, vocational flight training, apprenticeships and other on-the-job training. The SAA works individually with veterans and their families to identify educational opportunities and assist with applications. In FY2025, the Illinois SAA provided Illinois veterans with opportunities to train at 1,424 approved education and training facilities. These numbers include educational programs at 175 universities, colleges, and community colleges, 116 vocational schools, and 438 high schools for dependents using the Survivors and Dependents Education Assistance program. The State Approving Agency also approved 624 apprenticeship and on-the-job training facilities for veterans, military service members, and their families. Illinois leads the nation in active apprenticeship and OJT programs.

The National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASSA) was formed to protect and promote the G.I. Bill® and support the efforts of the SAA with education, resources, and networking opportunities. It held its annual conference in Pentagon City from February 7th through the 11th. The IDVA State Approving Agency (SAA) team, Jeffrey Lewis, Janine Ariola, and Andrew Piper participated in the conference, which offered three full days of presentations, education, and networking.

USDVA Deputy Secretary Dr. Paul Lawrence presented critical information about the current state and the future of VA benefits. The USDVA Executive Director of Education, Kenneth Smith provided an update on education. Legislation relevant to educational benefits was presented by a panel including members from TAPS, VFW, and the American Legion. An afternoon on Capitol Hill included a panel of members from the Veterans Committee and a liaison event with Indiana Senator Jim Banks and Illinois Representative Mike Bost.

"This was a great event as I was able to put names with faces, meet my mentors from Indiana and North Dakota, and make connections with others that will be able to help me as an Administrator," said SAA and VETS Administrator Jeffrey Lewis.

If you are a veteran or family member interested in learning more about the G.I. Bill® or other educational opportunities, [please click here](#).



Left to right: Veterans Educational Specialist Andrew Piper, SAA and VETS Administrator Jeffrey Lewis, and Veterans Educational Specialist Janine Ariola.

## Illinois Lottery Veterans Cash Grants Recipients

IDVA awarded nearly \$1 million in grants to support organizations providing vital services to veterans and their families across Illinois for the third quarter of FY26.

The grants are part of the Veterans' Cash Grants program, which aims to address critical issues facing veterans, including homelessness, post-traumatic stress treatment, behavioral health treatment, and workforce development. The grants are funded through proceeds from the Illinois Lottery's \$5 7x Bingo Multiplier ticket.

The Veterans Scratch-Off Lottery Ticket grant is a yearly competitive reimbursement grant offered quarterly to nonprofits, tax-exempt entities, and governmental organizations that assist veterans in need.



### Eligible organizations may apply for grants ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000 annually.

Each quarter, IDVA's committee reviews applications and awards grants to groups that have demonstrated proven need. Eligibility is open to government agencies, not-for-profits, veterans' organizations, and tax-exempt entities currently providing veterans' assistance or seeking to expand their services to include veterans' assistance.

- **Erase PTSD Now:** Assist veterans in gaining access to the Stellate Ganglion Block (SGB) treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- **A Safe Haven Foundation:** Offers permanent housing placement, homelessness prevention services, and financial assistance for rental and utility arrears to veterans.
- **Transitional Living Services, Inc.:** Employs veterans facing PTSD, homelessness, and reintegration challenges. Provides job coaching, peer support, and essential services while helping veterans gain skills and transition to civilian employment
- **Code Platoon:** Addresses unemployment and underemployment among veterans by providing clear pathways into high-demand technology careers.
- **Guardian Corps:** Provides daily direct outreach to homeless veterans by delivering nonperishable food, hot meals, clothing, hygiene kits, and essential sleeping gear such as tents and blankets.
- **Legal Aid Chicago:** Provides targeted civil legal services to veterans, service members, and their families.
- **Entrepreneurs Academy:** Empowers veterans through comprehensive entrepreneurial and business leadership education.
- **Midwest Shelter for Homeless Veterans, Inc:** Provides affordable housing paired with case management, employment assistance, and healthcare navigation.
- **The Chicago Lighthouse:** Supports veterans transitioning to civilian life by providing comprehensive employment services and wraparound support.

To learn more about Veterans Cash Grants, eligibility, and applications, visit:

<https://veterans.illinois.gov/programs/veterans-cash.html>

Applications are currently being accepted through March 31st.

# ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Do Your Part State

## Illinois Becomes a Do Your Part State to Strengthen Support of Military Families

Illinois is proud to announce it has officially become a Do Your Part State, joining a national effort to strengthen support for military families. Led by Blue Star Families in partnership with the National Governors Association, the Do Your Part State Initiative helps states take practical, data-informed steps to improve quality of life for military families — from spouse employment and childcare to education and community integration. The initiative supports states in identifying, prioritizing, and implementing policies that strengthen the stability, readiness, and well-being of military families. Illinois is home to over 550,000 veterans, and military families are essential to our communities and our nation’s readiness. By participating in this initiative, Illinois reaffirms its commitment to ensuring service members and their families can thrive wherever they are called to serve.

To learn more, visit: [Do Your Part State Initiative - Do Your Part](#)

# ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ IDVA is Hiring

IDVA is hiring across the agency in its Veterans’ Homes, Field Services (Veteran Service Officers and staff), and Central Office. Join a team in serving those who served in a supportive environment where the team is encouraged to grow. State benefits include generous paid days off and retirement plans. To support those interested in state employment, each month IDVA offers virtual job fairs to learn best practices on applying for state jobs, utilizing veterans’ benefit points, and tips for interviewing. Register for a class from the schedule provided. IDVA job postings can be found here: <https://veterans.illinois.gov/about-us/idvajobs.html>

3/2/2026	5:30-6:15 PM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward...	
3/4/2026	11:00-11:45AM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees	
3/10/2026	10:00-10:45 AM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points	
3/13/2026	12:00-12:45 PM	How to read a Job Bulletin	
3/16/2026	2:00-2:45 PM	Interview Tips and Tricks	
3/18/2026	1:00-1:45 PM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points	
3/24/2026	2:30-3:15PM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees	
3/25/2026	5:30 -6:15 PM	Interview Tips and Tricks	
3/26/2026	1:00-1:45 PM	How to read a Job Bulletin	
3/30/2026	7:30-8:15AM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward...	



# Desert Storm Gone But Never Forgotten

## Operation Desert Storm Remembrance Ceremony

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs invites you to  
join us in commemorating the 35th anniversary of  
the Operation Desert Storm Cease-Fire.

**Saturday, February 28, 2026  
11:00am**

Illinois State Military Museum  
1301 N. MacArthur Blvd., Springfield, Il. 62702



# Black History Month



Throughout Black History Month, we have recognized and celebrated the significant contributions of Black Americans to our nation, communities, and IDVA. Black women have served in our nation's military since before it was even a nation. They trailblazed courageously and contributed to protecting our freedoms at the highest level. They reached well deserved heights and honors never achieved before. Take a moment to learn about a few of the amazing women with appreciation for their service and awe of their determination.



*Danielle Green, Chicago, is a U.S. Army veteran, Paralympic gold medalist, and motivational speaker. After losing her left arm during combat in Iraq, she went on to win gold with the U.S. Paralympic Women's Basketball Team, becoming a powerful symbol of resilience and determination.*



*Brigadier General Hazel Johnson-Brown made history as the first African American woman general in the U.S. Army. With over 30 years of service in the Army Nurse Corps, she paved the way for generations of women leaders in military medicine and leadership.*



*Colonel Charity Adams Earley was the commanding officer of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, the only all-Black, all-female unit deployed overseas during World War II. Her leadership ensured critical mail reached millions of service members, boosting morale during wartime.*



*Chicago Central Office celebrates Black History Month at Wilma's Famous BBQ Tavern. Left to right: Administrative Assistant Jose Avilla, Communications Director Maureen Hartigan, Women Veterans Program Manager Margo Watson, HR and Recruitment Specialist Candice Rudd, Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn, Veteran Service Officer Cynthia McKee, Senior Policy Advisor Hannah Bonecutter, Procurement Officer Robin Webster, and Chief of Staff Jassen Strokosch.*



*Major General Marcelite J. Harris was the first African American woman to achieve the rank of Major General in the U.S. Air Force. She was a trailblazer in leadership, logistics, and advocacy for women in uniform.*



Veteran Service Officer Anthony Hernandez, Metro Region (Will Lockport), was honored as the Chicago Blackhawks Hero of the Game on 20 January 2026.



Veteran Service Officer Michele Richards (Chicago) participates in the Veteran Resource Fair at the Salvation Army in Norridge.



Veteran Service Officer Shynae Murphy (Chicago) participates in a Veteran Resource Fair the Kohl's Children's Museum in Glenview.

# Veterans' Homes



*Veterans' Home at Chicago: The Taft High School Freshman/Sophomore JROTC join U.S. Army veteran Albert Bruno for a performance of Letters From Home.*

Letters from Home is a two-person show that "infuses the classic style of war-time music with witty, modern edge. Its mission is to honor veterans, celebrate people, and unite the nation through music." As part of its national tour, Letters From Home entertained the veterans at the Chicago Home, community, and the Taft High School ROTC. Veterans were also gifted medals from the ROTC.



*Left to right: Wayne Madson SAL Commander, Ron Hoffman NEC (National Executive Committeeman), Josh Thielen Illinois Dept Adjutant, Roy Smith IL Dept Commander, Dan Wiley National Commander, IDVA Director Terry Prince, Chief of Staff Jassen Strosch, and Quincy Home Administrator Chuck Newton.*

*Front: IDVA Senior Home Administrator Angela Simmons, Jill Layton IL Dept Auxiliary, President, Pam Ray National Auxiliary President*



*Veterans' Home at Chicago: U.S. Navy veteran Maurice Kaufman and IDVA Senior Public Policy Advisory Hannah Bonecutter enjoyed a winning Bingo game. Volunteers and veterans join weekly for a spirited game of Bingo.*

The Veterans' Home at Quincy welcomed the American Legion National Commander Dan Wiley and Illinois Commander Roy Smith for a tour of the new domiciliary and long-term care building. The visit was part of 92nd annual Pilgrimage to the Tomb of President Abraham Lincoln, organized by Springfield Post No. 32 of the American Legion. The event was created in 1935 by World War I veterans and the American Legion to honor President Lincoln and the Civil War Veterans in Springfield. Today, American Legion members come from across the nation for the longest running tribute to President Lincoln. The event includes a commemorative breakfast and a procession to the tomb for a traditional wreath-laying ceremony at Oak Ridge Cemetery, one of the most visited cemeteries in the nation.

## The Illinois Attorney General offers webinars from the Military & Veterans Rights Bureau

The webinars will share important information designed to assist members of the veteran and military community, public and private employers and Human Resource professionals.

The **Informational Webinar for Veterans Assistance Commissions (VACs)** will provide an overview of the Illinois Military Veterans Assistance Act (MVAA) (330 ILCS 45). The webinar will cover the role of Veterans Assistance Commissions and county boards in the administration of benefits for military veterans and their families. Veteran Service Organizations, county Veterans Assistance Commissions, State's Attorney offices and county board members are encouraged to attend. The MVAA webinar will be held on April 16, 2026, at 11:00 a.m.

The **Illinois Service Member Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (ISERRA) Webinar** will provide an overview of ISERRA (330 ILCS 61), including the types of qualifying military service, the employment protections and reemployment rights for members of the National Guard, Reserves and Federal Auxiliaries while completing their military requirements. The discussion will include health insurance and pension protections available to service members as well as military leave for service members who are employees of qualifying public employers. Human Resources professionals, Union representatives, attorneys who practice employment law, service members and their families are encouraged to attend. The ISERRA webinar will be held on May 13, 2026, at 10:00 a.m.

The **What to Know About Veteran Consumer Scams Webinar** will provide an overview of common veteran scams, how to spot them and what to do if you have encountered one. Service members, veterans, their families, and advocacy organizations are welcome to attend. The webinar will be held on July 15, 2026, at 10:00 a.m.

To RSVP, please register via the links below or contact [special.events@ilag.gov](mailto:special.events@ilag.gov). I also encourage you to email questions in advance so we can be responsive to the issues you are facing.



# 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](mailto: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.**

**IDVA** ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF  
VETERANS AFFAIRS

★ Follow us

