



# VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 6, Issue 5 ★ May 2026



## Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

Illinois continues to demonstrate its ongoing commitment to veterans through the Introduction of Senate Bill (SB) 3737, which will create the Servicemember Education Rights Veneration (SERVE) Act. The General Assembly recognizes the common public interest in safeguarding and promoting participation in military service to the United States and the State by minimizing disadvantages to military service while pursuing higher education.

Additionally, IDVA participated in the **2026 Home Illinois Summit**. “Rising With Resilience” was the theme for this year’s summit that welcomed over 500 participants and brought together advocates, service providers, policymakers, and individuals with lived experience from across Illinois. They focused on five key areas: **Innovations and Successes, Staff and Community Resiliency, Program Technical Assistance, Artistic Offerings, Unsheltered Homelessness**: The **2026 Home Illinois Summit** spotlighted the remarkable individuals and organizations across Illinois who often work behind the scenes to create real, lasting change for people experiencing housing insecurity. To learn more about Home Illinois, click here: [IDHS: Office To Prevent And End Homelessness](#)

As you can see, Governor JB Pritzker is thinking big for all of Illinois. Focusing on growing our economy and creating jobs, stabilizing state government and balancing our budget, expanding healthcare to all Illinoisans, and investing in cradle to career education. Governor Pritzker’s agenda serves every region of our state, so no one is left behind.

This is how IDVA approaches its service to veterans. 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. When we are in the community, we intently listen to veterans’ personal stories and seek opportunities for change that could transform their lives.

Please read on to learn more about how the education legislation may impact you, the IL Home Summit, job opportunities and commemorating Memorial Day.

Thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

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

## The Service Members - Serve Act Passes: Protecting Access to Higher Education for Illinois Servicemembers and their Families Legislation Passes

The Illinois General Assembly passed SB 3737, which protects access to higher education for Illinois servicemembers and their families, ensuring they are not academically penalized when military duty interrupts their higher education.

Initiated by Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul, the legislation was unanimously passed and extends protections to spouses whose education is adversely impacted by a servicemember's military obligations and prohibits discrimination based on military status.

The legislation mirrors the federal SERVE Act, 20 U.S.C. §1091c, which is enforced by the Department of Education and outlines higher education readmission requirements for servicemembers. It will provide another level of protection for servicemembers through the Attorney General's enforcement and will also:

- Require higher education institutions to accommodate academic military leave when students are called to service.
- Ensure readmission rights following completion of military duty, including readmission with the same enrollment status, number of credit hours, academic standing and academic progress.
- Provide for reimbursement by the higher education institution of expenses, including tuition and fees, charged during the period of military service.
- Require reasonable academic accommodations, such as flexible deadlines or alternate assignments.
- To speak with an IDVA Veteran Service Officer about education benefits, find your [local VSO here](#).



## IDVA is Hiring

IDVA continues to recruit, train, and hire for positions across the agency, including medical professionals, dietitians, social workers, activities professionals, IT staff, engineers, groundskeepers, and support staff. To position interested candidates, IDVA offers virtual job fairs to learn about navigating applying for Illinois state positions, interviewing, and resume tips. Check out the schedule and register for a virtual job fair that might work for you.



## ★ Serve those who served ★

Join IDVA for a series of virtual job fairs to learn more about becoming part of Team IDVA

Date	Time	Event Registration
6/1/2026	5:30-6:15 PM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward... 
6/3/2026	2:30-3:15 PM	How to read a Job Bulletin... 
6/5/2026	10:00-10:45 AM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees... 
6/9/2026	2:00-2:45 PM	Interview Tips and Tricks... 
6/11/2026	9:30-10:15 AM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points... 
6/15/2026	2:00-2:45 PM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees... 
6/16/2026	5:30-6:15 PM	How to read a Job Bulletin... 
6/24/2026	12:00-12:45 PM	Creating a Profile, Putting you Best Foot Forward... 
6/26/2026	9:30-10:15 AM	Interview Tips and Tricks... 
6/29/2026	2:00-2:45 PM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points... 

# Home Illinois Summit

The 2026 Home Illinois Summit. "Rising With Resilience" was attended by over 500 advocates, service providers, policymakers, and individuals from across Illinois to collaborate on innovative, community-driven solutions to homelessness. The two-day summit offered discussion groups, workshops, and networking. Director Prince moderated a panel, "A Changing Landscape: What the Future Holds for Illinois Communities and People Experiencing Homelessness." The panelists included:

- **Director Delrice Adams** - Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority
- **Dr. Brian Durham** - Executive Director, Illinois Community College Board
- **Director Mary Killough** - Illinois Department on Aging
- **Ron Lund** - Chief Operating Officer, Project Now, Inc.
- **Marcellis North** - Intern, Office to Prevent and End Homelessness
- **Secretary Dulce Quintero** - Illinois Department of Human Services
- **Angie Walker** - Homeless Program Manager, City of Rockford Health & Human Services

The session featured a conversation between members of the Illinois Interagency Task Force on Homelessness and members of the Illinois Community Advisory Council on Homelessness. Attendees gained insight into systemic pressures and the shifting landscape of federal policy, with a specific focus on the potential challenges of the HUD Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). This discussion explored strategies tailored to Illinois' most vulnerable populations, focusing on youth, veterans, and aging

adults and emphasizing the urgent need for resilient, cross-sector collaboration to ensure housing stability for all Illinoisans.

- Key Focus Areas
- **Innovations and Successes:** Highlighting effective strategies, policy advancements, and programmatic successes, particularly those supported through Home Illinois and other state initiatives.
- **Staff and Community Resiliency:** Exploring strategies to prevent burnout, strengthen workforce sustainability, and support resilience among staff, partners, and communities.
- **Program Technical Assistance:** Building capacity in program design, management, reporting, compliance, and implementation to improve outcomes.
- **Artistic Offerings:** Featuring visual art, music, video, and other creative expressions that reflect lived experience, housing insecurity, and work in the homeless services field.
- **Unsheltered Homelessness:** Sharing evidence-based practices for supporting unsheltered individuals, communicating best practices, and addressing the harms of criminalization trends.



*Director Prince moderates the IL Home Summit 2026 morning plenary session.*



# Women Veterans Program

IDVA's Women Veterans Program is continuously growing and exploring elevated ways to serve women veterans and provide them with support and resources. IDVA is excited to share the expanded Women Veterans Program webpage with access to event calendars and a library of the 25 Women Veteran Leaders in 2025 and 2026, and other helpful links to resources. [Take a look.](#)



## 25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders in 2026



**Melissa Beckford**, *Army*

Melissa Beckford is an Army veteran with nine years of combined service, a licensed clinician, and an advocate with over 15 years of public service. She currently serves as the Northern Region Supervisor for the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA), overseeing field operations across northern Illinois and guiding Veteran Service Officers to ensure veterans and their families receive state and federal benefits. She also manages the IDVA Peer Review process, ensuring statewide claims meet quality standards and identifying training needs. Melissa joined IDVA in July 2017 as a Veteran Service Officer and advanced into regional leadership. Prior to her state role, she served as a VSO with the Winnebago County Veterans Assistance Commission, supporting homeless veterans, women veterans, and those facing barriers to care.

Melissa holds a Bachelor of Science in Social Science from Troy University and a Master of Science in Professional Counseling from Grand Canyon University. She is a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor and is pursuing her Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) to further expand her clinical and leadership expertise in serving trauma-affected populations.

She began her military career as a Supply Specialist in the Army Reserves and later served on active duty as an Administrative Specialist at Fort Benning, Georgia. While at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), she used her bilingual skills to train Latin American soldiers. She later became a Mental Health Specialist and served overseas in several humanitarian missions, in a MASH unit, and at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, supporting soldiers with PTSD and other trauma-related conditions.

Melissa is a Board Member of the Homefront 815 Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting veterans experiencing financial hardship and other barriers to care. She is also a former member of the City of Rockford Zoning Board and Veterans Drop-in Center and a passionate advocate for survivors of domestic violence, veterans, and immigrants, providing pro bono or low-cost counseling and psychological evaluations. In 2023, she was featured in the documentary *Take Your Own Notes*, highlighting the resilience, leadership, and lasting impact of women veterans in the Rockford, Illinois area.



## 25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders in 2026



**Celeste Latham**, *Air Force*

Celeste Latham is a U.S. Air Force veteran and respected leader in veteran advocacy, leadership development, and public service. She has served with distinction in The American Legion at the post, district, division, and department levels, and currently serves as Department Senior Vice Commander for the State of Illinois. Throughout her service, she has been deeply committed to strengthening posts, mentoring emerging leaders, and supporting the training and development of veteran leaders across the state.

Ms. Latham is a graduate of the National American Legion College and has served as a facilitator and department chair for the program, contributing to the education and preparation of Legion leaders statewide and nationally. She is also a dedicated advocate for student veterans, serving as an advisor to Student Veterans of America at Northern Illinois University, where she supports student success and leadership development. Professionally, she serves as an Associate Vice President at Northern Illinois University. Her career reflects a sustained commitment to service, leadership, and the advancement of veterans and future leaders.



## #StriveFor500

### Register at The Military Women's Memorial to collect and preserve our history

The Military Women's Memorial honors the commitment, contributions, and experiences of Servicewomen.

Servicewomen, past and present, are invited to share their stories in the Memorial's registry to archive their contributions.



Women Service Members, Veterans, and Reserve/National Guard, join the 2026 Military Women's Memorial's #StriveFor500 campaign, challenging every state and territory to register at least 500 military women to preserve their powerful stories in the National Digital Repository.

In 2025, Illinois surpassed its goal and registered 533 women veterans, making Illinois a Gold Status state.

Our 2026 campaign is underway. Our goal? Gold Status for the second year in a row, and for more women veterans to tell their own stories.

Join us. Step up. Be counted



It only takes a few minutes to register yourself at [www.womensmemorial.org](http://www.womensmemorial.org)

Every zip code. Every rank.

Every era—from the Revolutionary War to present day.



# ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Women Veterans



*Left to right: IDVA Women Veterans Coordinator, Michael Smith, Illinois Joining Forces Northern Regional Coordinator, Heather L. Smith, Chicago State University Veterans & Military Services Coordinator, Patrick B. Grimes, VA Market Growth Coordinator, Nekohl Johnson, Founder/Board President, Where We Meet, Inc., Alfonso Lopez, USMC Combat Veteran, VET Center Outreach Specialist*

On March 26, 2026, Margo Watson, IDVA Women Veterans Coordinator, attended the Chicago State University Veterans Resource Center Soft Opening Celebration, held in the Business, Health and Science Building (Room 435). The event introduced the revitalized Veterans Resource Center, which provides resources, support, and guidance for student veterans.

The celebration also provided an opportunity for community leaders and partner organizations to connect with students, introduce themselves, and discuss the services and support available through their respective departments and organizations. Community leaders also had the opportunity to meet with Heather L. Smith, Veterans & Military Services Coordinator, to discuss ongoing support and collaboration efforts for student veterans.

# Memorial Day

IDVA commemorated Memorial Day at ceremonies in its five Veterans' Homes and attended national and local ceremonies. The team dispersed across the state to demonstrate to veterans and their communities that we are united in remembering those who gave the ultimate sacrifice and in gratitude for the freedoms they protected for generations to come.



Marine Corps Veteran and IDVA Chief of Staff Jassen Strokosch participated in a "Murph" event at the Veterans' Home at Quincy. The "Hero Workout" was created in tribute to U.S. Navy SEAL Lt. Michael P. Murphy, who was killed in action in Afghanistan on June 28, 2005. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. The Quincy Family YMCA organized the challenge, which includes a one-mile run, 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 air squats, and ends with another one-mile run.



**The Chicago Veterans Ruck March** brought the community together in a shared commitment to supporting veterans and advancing suicide prevention awareness. IDVA Chief of Staff & Marine Corps veteran Jassen Strokosch and IDVA Legislative Liaison and Army National Guard Capt. Dylan Hopp participated and, while working hard, enjoyed a day of fellowship and remembrance.



At the Nation's 158th Official Memorial Day Observance at Arlington Cemetery, IDVA Director Terry Prince represented Illinois and the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) as its president. He participated in the traditional parade of colors of veterans' organizations and laid a wreath around the perimeter of the Memorial Amphitheater to honor the service and sacrifice of those who gave their lives for our nation. The Memorial Day Observance is the culmination of three days of recognition, including Flags in, where the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, known as the Old Guard, places small American flags at over 260,000 graves. On Sunday, Flowers of Remembrance Day, visitors are invited to place flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and at gravesites.

Arlington National Cemetery honors those who have served our nation over 639 acres of rolling green hills and trees dating back hundreds of years. The carefully designed landscape demonstrates respect for those who are laid to rest and is a beautiful space for visitors



**The City of Chicago** came together to honor and remember our nation's fallen heroes during the Memorial Day Parade and wreath-laying ceremony in Daley Plaza. IDVA Terry Prince delivered remarks along with other dignitaries. The day began with a breakfast honoring Gold Star families to recognize the loss of their loved ones and concluded with a spirited parade through downtown. It was a meaningful day of reflection, gratitude, and remembrance as the community paid tribute to the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country.



*U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Bob Belcher with his wife, Sheri.*

**The Veterans' Home at Anna** brought the community together for a heartfelt barbecue and ice cream social. Residents, staff, and guests shared great food, sweet treats, and even better company while honoring the service and sacrifice of our nation's heroes. It was a meaningful day filled with gratitude, connection, and remembrance.



**The Veterans' Home at Quincy** held a moving Memorial Day ceremony featuring remarks from Director Terry Prince, keynote remarks from Army National Guard Brigadier General and former Quincy Public Schools Superintendent Roy Webb, and music by Steve Bordenkircher. The program concluded with a wreath-laying ceremony followed by a rifle salute and Taps by the American Legion Post #37 Honor Guard.



*Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn and U.S. Navy Veteran Gerald Kovalcik.*

**Veterans' Home at Manteno** Veterans, their families, and staff gathered in Veterans Hall at the Veterans' Home at Manteno to honor those who served. The program featured the Marine Corps League, a rifle volley by St. George American Legion. The keynote address was delivered by the executive director of Buddy Check 22 and U.S. Navy veteran David McCleery. Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn attended the ceremony and visited with veterans.



*U.S. Air Force veteran Sigismuns Kurzawa (Ziggy) tends to the newly planted flowers.*

Honoring their legacy, one seed at a time. This Memorial Day at the Veterans' Home at Chicago, local Boy Scout troops presented donated planter beds in tribute to residents we've lost. Planting tomatoes, flowers, and watermelons as a living reminder of their service and sacrifice. Following the ceremony, residents came together for an ice cream social, sharing community, remembrance, and a sweet moment of connection.



*Left to right: Ashley Owings (25 IWVL 26), Laura Doss (25 IWVL 25), Erica Borggren (Board Chair of Illinois Joining Forces (IJF), Sonia Kennedy (25 IWVL 26), Renee Dickerson (25 IWVL 25), Lourdes Fernando (25 IWVL 26), Cynthia McKee (IDVA VSO), Margo Watson (IDVA Women Veteran Coordinator), Angela Walker (25 IWVL 25).*

The Crystal Lake Memorial Day Parade and Cemetery Ceremony presented by the City of Crystal Lake and Robert Dorn, Sr. Vice Commander, American Legion Post 171, was a solemn event dedicated to honoring veterans and remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country. Erica Borggren, was the keynote speaker for the ceremony, is a Rhodes Scholar, West Point graduate, former U.S. Army captain, and previous IDVA Director. During the ceremony, she recognized the Illinois Women Veterans Leaders who marched alongside her in the parade prior to the service. IDVA VSO Cynthia McKee and Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson participated.

# Nurses' Week: May 6-12th



IDVA celebrated the nurses whose work often happens away from the spotlight but at the very heart of care in its five Veterans' Homes. This year's theme, The Power of Nurses, reflects their strength in delivering unmatched care to the veterans in our homes. They are powerful, highly educated, and trained to understand, recognize, and treat individual needs.

As part of the IDVA Veterans' Homes care team, they carry the lamp, symbolizing compassion, dedication, and the promise to never leave a patient in darkness. In our Homes, that light shines every day through relationships built

on the trust you earn from residents and families. Care is measured not only in treatments given, but in hands held, stories remembered and lives honored.

We thank them for carrying the lamp of nursing with compassion and pride. Their work matters, their dedication is seen, and their light makes a difference every single day.

Our nurses join 5,000,000 nurses across the country who have dedicated their lives to caring for others. We are grateful they chose IDVA to serve those who served.

IDVA is recruiting and hiring nurses at its five homes. Nurses share a vocation, and choosing to care for veterans is rewarding. Sharing your education, training, and compassion with veterans is transformative during a crucial time in their lives. Learn more about careers at [IDVA here](#).





# Meet a Veteran Service Officer



Veteran Service Officer Gerald Enriquez and IDVA Director Terry Prince at the Veterans Business Symposium in Richton Park. Gerald is a U.S. Army veteran and has been with IDVA for two years. After retiring from military service, he served in supply chain and operations management.

*"I spent 21 years in the military, mentoring and serving my fellow Soldiers. I want to continue that daily mantra by joining the fight in advocating for our Veteran population."* - Gerald Enriquez.

Hours:

Park Forest Village Hall

9:00 AM - 4:00 PM: Monday-Friday by appointment

350 Victory Drive, Park Forest

Office Hours at the Veterans' Home at Manteno will resume after a construction project is completed.



Veteran Service Officer Cynthia McKee and Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson participated in the Shiloh Baptist Church of Waukegan Veterans Resource Fair in Waukegan.

The event brought together approximately 40 local, state, and federal vendors dedicated to supporting veterans throughout the surrounding community and the Great Lakes region. The resource fair provided veterans and their families with access to valuable information, services, and community connections.



Metro Region Supervisor Robert Iverson III and VSO Tanya Reyes

The GENCenter, formerly known as the Frisbie Center, hosted a "Networking After Hours" on behalf of the Des Plaines Chamber of Commerce, to reintroduce its refreshed facility and new brand to the local business community.



# 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

