



VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 5, Issue 10 ★ October 2025

★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince



On October 20th, Governor JB Pritzker, state, local, and community leaders joined us in Springfield for the grand opening of the new Veterans' Home at Quincy. In front of a standing-room-only crowd, we cut the ribbon to celebrate the opening of the new domiciliary and long-term care buildings. The \$300 million investment, funded through the Governor's historic Rebuild Illinois capital program and federal funding, is delivering modern, safe, and dignified living for Illinois veterans.

This is a historic moment for Illinois veterans in our care. These stunning buildings are well equipped to meet the range of care the Home provides and are designed to elevate the veterans' quality of life with gracious living, outdoor, and gathering spaces. Additionally, this project invests in our extraordinary staff – giving them a world-class environment to provide care and practice their craft.

The new Veterans' Home at Quincy has the capacity to support 467 residents cared for by 417 skilled staff. The domiciliary, an independent living residence, welcomed its first residents in January and offers 88 private studio and one-bedroom apartments with accommodations large enough for resident spouses and children. Similarly, the long-term care (LTC) building offers private rooms and bathrooms for 210 residents and welcomed its first residents in September.

IDVA also operates Veterans' Homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, and Manteno. Each home is unique and shares the same commitment to compassionate and professional care in communities that are supportive and welcoming. Care in a veterans' home is a benefit offered to those who have served, and the cost of care is based on ability to pay, and is less than \$2,000 per month. For those interested in independent living or skilled nursing care, [click here to learn more](#).

Thank you for staying connected to the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs.

Sincerely,

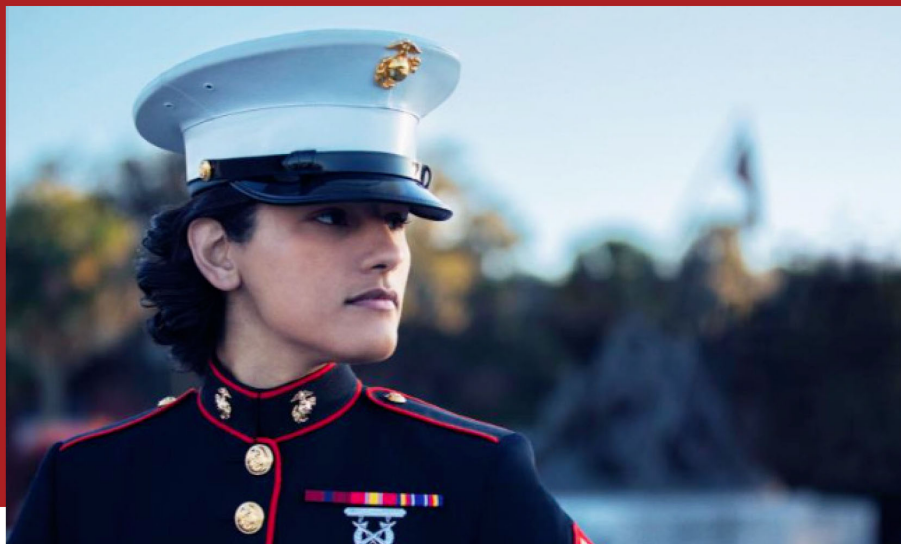
Terry Prince, U.S. Navy Veteran and IDVA Director



State Representative Kyle Moore, Mayor Linda Moore, VFW State Commander Eugene Blackwell, Governor JB Pritzker, Capital Development Board Director TJ Edwards, State Representative Swanson, IDVA Director Terry Prince, and Quincy Home Administrator Chuck Newton.



Marines Cake-Cutting Ceremony



The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs
invites all Marines, past and present, to celebrate
250 years of honor, courage, and commitment.



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS CAKE-CUTTING CEREMONY

**November 10th
1:00 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.**

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
212 North 6th Street, Springfield, IL
Please RSVP by November 1st: IDVA.Events@illinois.gov
Free Admission

250 YEARS OF
**MARINES FIGHTING
FOR OUR NATION**



IDVA Supports Breast Cancer Awareness at Sista Strut 2025

Margo Watson, Senior Project Manager/WomenVeterans Coordinator; Cynthia McKee, Veteran Service Officer; and Candice Rudd, Recruitment Specialist, participated in the annual Sista Strut event to show support for Women Veterans and breast cancer awareness. They were joined by partners from the Cook County Veterans Affairs Department to stand in solidarity with survivors, families, and the community.

Sista Strut is dedicated to raising awareness about breast cancer in women of color and connecting communities with vital health resources. Studies have shown that African American women are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer at a younger age and have higher mortality rates. Events like Sista Strut promote early detection, education, and the search for a cure—key steps toward improving survival rates.

Additionally, Women Veterans face a significantly higher risk of developing breast cancer than non-veteran women. Recent research by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and publications such as *Military Medicine and Cancer Epidemiology* suggest that environmental exposures during military service—including burn pits, toxic chemicals, and other hazards—may contribute to this elevated risk.

According to VA data, breast cancer rates among women Veterans are approximately 30% higher than in the civilian population. In response, the VA provides specialized benefits and support services for women Veterans, including:

- Priority access to breast cancer screenings, diagnostics, and early detection services
- Coverage for treatment of service-connected illnesses related to breast cancer
- Specialized Women Veterans Health Programs that offer comprehensive cancer care and prevention education

IDVA remains committed to advocating for the health and well-being of Women Veterans. By participating in community events like Sista Strut, we aim to increase awareness, promote early detection, and ensure veterans know about the resources available to them.

To learn more about breast cancer screening and resources, [click here](#).



Left to right: VSO Cynthia McKee, Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson, and HR Specialist Candice Rudd sport camo and pink.



Veterans' Home at LaSalle: Total Pink Out



Veterans ' Home at Quincy: left to right: Becca Bockhold, Angie Clark, Kim Gilley (pink shoes), Angie Strang, Janet Llewellyn, Kelsey Terwelp, Jim Muldoon, Amy Sandidge, Tiffany Todd, Scott Alberts, and Zack Perine.



Veterans ' Home at Quincy: Dietary, left to right: Aryn Hills, Bobbette Morris, Kristen Homan, Rachel Graff, Alan Sparrow, Jaden Stone, Shawn Bunch, and Tierra Gibson.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Pink Out Day



Veterans' Home at Quincy: Administration, left to right: Steve Stewart, Devyn Winters, Andrew Juette, Amanda Bunch, Carla Trautvetter, Jessica Williams, Rhonda Lightfoot, Jennifer Klauser, Kim Niekamp, Chuck Newton, Lisa Schnelle, and Danell Tullock.



Veterans' Home at Chicago: Metro Region Supervisor Robert Iverson and Veteran Service Officer Claudia Bautista.



Veterans' Home at Chicago: left to right: Manindra Maskey, Nick Steen, Maricel Saria, Sonia Segarra, Latasha Powell, Ana Huizar, Gemma Barcebal, Akeelah Boyce and Brittney Chitwood.



Veterans' Home at Chicago: left to right top row: Marion Witherspoon, Jennifer Malone, Tramika Robinson, Sonia Segarra, Denise Poore, Angela Simmons, Ana Huizar, Sijimol Santhosh, Lashell Parent, Rovena Silo, Nisha Mani, Priya Thomas, Madelyn Booker, Janice Christian, and Shannon Clay. bottom row: Karen Daley, Karen Boleaga, and Luz Gonzalez.



Central Office: Springfield: Lahni Fry-Oravis, Jackie Hughes, Patti Wills, Amanada Bentler, Ann Holladay, Crystal Womack, Shannon Schmansky, Jennifer Franklin, Brittany Hawkins. Aaron xxx, and Kimberly Yantis. Back row: Bill Hunt, Josh Smith, Riley McKneelen, Sean Miller, Amber Matulis, Ashley McDaniel, Mark Patterson, and Dan Brown.



Chicago Central Office: Dylan Hopp, Director Terry Prince, Margo Watson, Cynthia McKee, Robin Webster, and Maureen Hartigan.

Veterans' Home at Manteno Elevates Meals and Service

The Veterans' Home at Manteno's Dietary Department has transformed the dining experience by focusing on choice, flexibility, and quality, and creating a mealtime atmosphere that feels more like home. The Dietary Department is proud of the progress and looks forward to continuing to serve its members with care and creativity.

The transition from out-sourced meal service to in-house has elevated the food quality, service, and the variety of meals served to the residents. The Home implemented a buffet-style meal service offered on the unit where residents can see the food as it's served, make choices, and enjoy second servings.

Additionally, veterans are offered a natural wake process of service, which allows them to dine when and where they would like. A continental breakfast is offered for both early and late risers, and buffet-style hot meals are served for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Whenever a resident arrives in the dining room, they're welcomed and served.

For those who prefer something different, the newly-opened Pentagon Café serves quick favorites like hamburgers, hot dogs, salads, soups, and a daily special. Veterans may also enjoy ice cream from a new ice cream dispenser, soda, and coffee any time.

The Pentagon Café has become a favorite gathering place where members can grab a quick bite, spend time with friends, or enjoy a meal with family. It's all part of the Homes' ongoing effort to make dining at Manteno more flexible, enjoyable, and member-centered.



Director Terry Prince, Administrator Tanya Huston, and Chief of Staff Jassen Strokosch at the Pentagon Café.



Adams County Bicentennial Commission Chairperson Chuck Scholz presents IDVA Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn with a plaque recognizing the Home's 139 years of service to Adams County.

Adams County Bicentennial

The Adams County Bicentennial Commission honored the Veterans' Home at Quincy for its 139 years of service to Adams County. The program included the presentation of a plaque by Commission Chairperson Chuck Scholz to IDVA Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn, as well as a video featuring veterans in Adams County and other local events celebrating the county's 250th anniversary. It was enjoyed along with a picnic lunch.

"All of you promote a culture of excellence in care and go to great lengths to accommodate the vast array of needs that each veteran may have," said Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn. "The behind-the-scenes staff keep the Home running effectively and efficiently. We are incredibly proud of you and deeply grateful for your dedication to serving those who have served. You deserve this special recognition today."

Healthcare Food Service Week: October 5th – 11th

The Dietary teams at the five IDVA Veterans' Homes serve anywhere from 52 to over 300 residents three meals a day and snacks. The dietitians carefully plan nutritious and delicious meals, determine and order the appropriate amount of food, and oversee careful preparation and serving. It's a monumental effort, and one that is central to providing veterans with an enjoyable meal experience. Their role is integral to the well-being and quality of life for veterans in our care. We are very grateful!



Veterans' Home at Quincy: Dietary Team left to right: Shawn Bunch, Eric Couchman, Janet Llewellyn, Jeff Bergman, Shelly Watson, Drew Hutmacher, Julie Sharrow, Patty Spillman, Tony Barnard, Brandon Baker, Rachel Graff, Bryan Brocksieck, Keri Madding, Sara Calhoun, Bobbette Morris, Aryn Hills, Alex Young, Ty Humphrey, Jaden Stone, Alan Sparrow, Tina Bland, and Darien Burcham.



Veterans' Home at Quincy: left to right: Joseph Smith, Linda French, Dustin Foster, Melony Parsons, Denise Lewis, Kimberly McDermott, Javier Talton, and Ila Farris. Back row, left to right: Shawn Bunch, Lucas Kite, Julius Young, Braden Hunter Kyle Brigman, Philip Gullion, Tanner Cox, Kristen Homan, and Darien Burcham.

25 Women Veteran Leaders in 2025

The Women Veterans Program continues to showcase the 25 Women Veteran Leaders of 2025. Women veterans were nominated and selected for their contributions to the women veteran community. They were honored at a lunch and ceremony held on March 31st at Malcolm X College. To learn more, [click here](#).



Vernessa Henderson
U.S. Army Veteran

Major Vernessa L. Henderson, U.S. Army veteran, is a Logistics Officer currently assigned to the Joint Force Headquarters in Springfield, IL, where, for over 13 years, she has been the Liaison Advisor for the Military Entrance Processing Command in North Chicago, IL.

A native of Illinois, Vernessa earned her Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Chicago State University, an Associate of Applied Science at Rock Valley College, and an Associate of Science in Electronics at DeVry Academy.

She is the visionary CEO and Founder of One Shift Mastery Consultant, a dynamic force in the world of personal and professional development. With an impressive 30+ year tenure in military service, Vernessa has seamlessly transitioned her discipline and leadership skills into the entrepreneurial realm, emerging as a High Impact Growth Coach with a mission to empower fellow veterans.

As a Certified Consultant for both the Proctor Gallagher Institute and Jack Canfield, Vernessa leverages world-class methodologies to guide prior service military members in transforming their unique military skills into thriving seven-figure entrepreneurial success stories. Vernessa's approach is centered around cultivating a deep awareness of self, breaking through limiting beliefs, and unlocking new levels of influence and income.

Her dedication to turning service into abundance is not just a professional mission but a personal passion. She believes in the power of dedication and discipline, and through her coaching, she inspires others to harness these qualities to achieve extraordinary results.

Vernessa's involvement in The Edge Mastermind, hosted by Dean Graziosi, further amplifies her impact. This exclusive mastermind is a gateway to transforming businesses through advanced growth strategies and an unparalleled network of business leaders. With a commitment to lifelong learning and helping others realize their potential, Vernessa is a beacon of empowerment and transformation. Her work has touched countless lives, proving that with the right mindset and guidance, anyone can achieve greatness.

Vernessa's military awards include Army Commendation Medal, Army Reserve Components Achievement Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal, Army Service Ribbon, Army Reserve Components Overseas Training Ribbon, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, and a Meritorious Service Medal.



Nekohl Chantelle Johnson
U.S. Army Veteran

Nekohl Chantelle Johnson, a U.S. Army veteran, is an educator and advocate committed to the empowerment and well-being of women veterans and trauma survivors. With over 35 years of experience in the clinical laboratory field, she has progressed from laboratory technician to director-level leadership, utilizing her expertise in healthcare, business, and education to develop impactful programs that promote healing and growth.

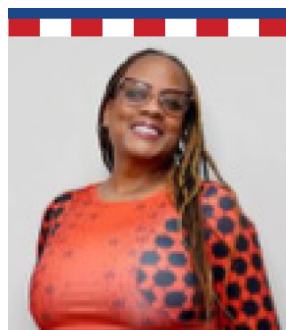
As the Founder and President of Where We Meet, Inc., a nonprofit theatre company for veterans and trauma survivors, Nekohl harnesses the power of storytelling and the arts to facilitate healing. She is also the visionary behind Be Whole with Nekohl, a platform that equips women veteran leaders with resources, education, and custom tools to achieve wholeness in all aspects of life.

Beyond her nonprofit work, Nekohl is a health sciences professor in both college and private education sectors, shaping future leaders in healthcare. She is also a dedicated veteran community leader, having established multiple Veterans Coffee Chats across Chicagoland, creating safe spaces for veterans to connect, share resources, and support suicide prevention efforts.

She currently serves as the 2025 Ambassador for the Shero Coffee Club, the 16th District Women's Chairperson for VFW Illinois, Assistant to the State Women's Chairperson, and will ascend to State of Illinois VFW Women's Chairperson in June 2025. Nekohl is also a proud member of American Legion Post 800 and the National Women Veterans United.

A published author (A Queen Was Born Again), speaker, and evangelist, Nekohl's work is rooted in faith, resilience, and community. Through leadership, education, and innovative wellness initiatives, she continues to uplift and advocate for women veterans, ensuring they have the support and resources to thrive.

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Yvette Jones Swanson
U.S. Army Veteran

Yvette Jones Swanson, U.S. Army veteran, is the CEO of Vetmeters, LLC., where she designed transformative housing initiatives, including the Beverly Veterans Housing Plan and the Toriano Sanzone "Reformative Housing Models." She educates veterans through professional services, seminars, and public speaking. She has assisted 5,000 homeless veterans in homeownership,

written three books on veteran housing, and conducts workshops at the Jesse Brown VA Hospital.

Yvette is the Founder and CEO of 100 Pretty Purse for Female Veterans, a nationally recognized initiative dedicated to uplifting and celebrating women Veterans for over a decade. With a deep commitment to ensuring women veterans feel appreciated, especially during the holiday season, Yvette has led efforts that go beyond material gifts to foster connection, dignity, and recognition.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Women Veterans

Military Women's Memorial: Strivefor500 Campaign: Go for the Gold

Women veterans are invited to register in the National Digital Registry for the Military Women's Memorial to preserve their service and stories for future generations. The Strivefor500 challenges each state to enroll 500 women in 2025. Illinois has achieved bronze status by enrolling over 300 women veterans, and is going for the gold by registering 500 women veterans by the end of 2025.

The Memorial honors the commitment, contributions, and experiences of Servicewomen. The Registry records and preserves the service and stories of women veterans for future generations. With three months left in the year, IDVA's Women Veterans Program will continue to recruit women to register their service and stories to surpass its ambitious goal of 500 registrants. Let's keep the momentum going. If you are a woman veteran, please consider registering and preserving your story at www.womensmemorial.org. Encourage the woman veteran or servicemember in your life to share and document her story. For additional information, contact IDVA Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson, margo.watson@illinois.gov.



★ ★ ★ ★ ★ IDVA is Hiring

IDVA offers a wide range of positions with an emphasis on upward mobility possibilities for those looking to build a career in serving veterans. Positions include:

- **Veteran Service Officers** who assist veterans with obtaining their earned benefits and services.
- **Medical professionals, social workers, dietitians, physical therapists, engineers, and support staff** at IDVA's five Veterans' Homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy. Working in a Veterans' Home is an opportunity to join a team that shares a mission of building a strong and close community to care for veterans.
- **Central Office staff** who support the Homes and the VSOs, including Administration, Communications, Equal Opportunity, Fiscal, Labor, Legislation, and Programs.

IDVA strives to create a work environment that is supportive and that develops individuals based on their skills and professional goals. IT offers competitive salaries, excellent benefits, professional development opportunities, retirement plans, and outstanding work-life balance. If you are interested in meaningful work serving Illinois' heroes, learn more at one of IDVA's virtual job Fairs and to learn more about available positions, [click here](#).

★ 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
11/3/2025	2:00-2:45 P.M.	IDVA Extraordinary Employees..... 
11/4/2025	10:00-10:45 A.M.	Creating a Profile..... 
11/7/2025	9:00-9:45 A.M.	How to Read a Job Bulletin..... 
11/12/2025	1:00-1:45 P.M.	How to Certify Your Veterans Points..... 
11/13/2025	12:00-12:45 P.M.	Interview Tips and Tricks..... 
11/17/2025	5:30-6:15 P.M.	How to Read a Job Bulletin..... 
11/18/2025	9:30-10:15 A.M.	IDVA Extraordinary Employees..... 
11/19/2025	5:30-6:15 P.M.	Creating a Profile..... 
11/20/2025	7:30-8:15 A.M.	Interview Tips and Tricks..... 
11/21/2025	9:00-9:45 A.M.	How to Certify Your Veterans Points..... 

IDVA ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS

Field Services

IDVA Field Services Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) continue to meet veterans at community events across the state. They offer on-site counsel, resources, and at often have access to file claims. If you would like a VSO to attend your event, please [click here](#).



Veteran Service Officer Cynthia McKee (Chicago), IDVA Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson, and Veteran Service Officer Gerald Enriquez (Manteno) attend the National Women Veterans United, Women's Stand Down Event, Oak Lawn, IL.



Veteran Service Officer Brandon Jagers (Chicago Veterans' Home) at the North Suburban Cook County American Job Center Resource Fair in Wheeling, IL



VSO Dan Ebker and VSO Michele Hansen-Hoback attended the 4th Annual Veterans Fair at the Bloomington Public Library.



Veteran Service Officer Michelle Downey at the State Senator Dewitt/Cox event in Crystal Lake.



VSO William Illa, Northern Region Supervisor Melissa Beckford, and VSO Frank Delatorre attend the Illinois Association of Hispanic State Employees Conference as part of Hispanic Heritage Month.

Team IDVA: New Team Members

Aaron Eldridge joins IDVA's Springfield Office as the Central Office Coordinator after serving as a Rehabilitation Case Coordinator for the Illinois Department of Human Services. He served eight years in the Illinois Air National Guard, where he served as a Heavy Equipment Operator. While serving, he earned a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Illinois and is currently earning his graduate degree in Human Services with a concentration in Alcohol and Substance Abuse. "I am excited to be part of IDVA and helping veterans live their best lives."

Raymond Thomas joined IDVA as the Metro Field Coordinator assigned to the Forest Park location after working for Echo City Transportation. Raymond served in the Army National Guard. Raymond is the father of five children and enjoys playing drums for his church, "helping anyone I can who needs it."



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

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.



**ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS**

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