



VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 5, Issue 9 ★ September 2025



★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

Last week, while attending the Illinois Joining Forces regional summit meeting, I overheard someone say, "This has been one of the busiest years of serving veterans I've ever seen." It's hard to argue with that statement, especially considering the number of changes happening at the federal government. Thankfully, your Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, working with Illinois Joining Forces, County Veterans Assistance Commissions, veteran service organizations, educational institutions, and thousands of non-profits, ensure that Illinois' incredible array of support and service remains second to none.

Throughout September, IDVA personnel were deployed across the state, spreading awareness of veteran suicide prevention, engaging in community events to support veterans interested in benefits and services, and reaching out to women veterans to ensure their unique challenges are supported. This is a solid team of 1,300 men and women dedicated to achieving our mission of ensuring that veterans thrive in Illinois.

Veterans are concerned that activity at the federal level will impact veterans' benefits and services. IDVA Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) are informed and continue to be available to answer veterans' questions and file claims. Our VSOs are trained in all areas of claims and benefits and are poised to work one-on-one with veterans. This individual service guides a veteran through the process so they can achieve their goals, whether it is obtaining education, housing, healthcare, or a job. More than ever, IDVA wants veterans to know where we are, how to find us, and what we can do for them. VSOs can be [located here](#).

Save the date: Next month, on November 10, IDVA will be hosting a cake-cutting ceremony commemorating the 250th birthday of the United States Marine Corps. The ceremony is part of the USMC Heritage Foundation's campaign for all 50 states to acknowledge this landmark with this traditional ceremony. We invite all active duty, veterans, and their families to participate. It will take place at 1:00 pm at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library in Springfield. An official invitation will follow, but please mark your calendars.

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

Sincerely,

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





The Fallen Outdoors is proud to serve Illinois veterans by providing opportunities to connect, heal, and build camaraderie through hunting, fishing, and outdoor adventures. Each year, Team Illinois hosts over 140 trips, giving an average of 450–475 veterans the chance to experience the outdoors, find community, and create lasting memories. From deer and turkey hunts to fishing trips and special events, every outing is designed to give back to those who have given so much for our country. Learn more about how The Fallen Outdoors supports veterans and get involved today: <https://thefallenoutdoors.org>

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Veterans in the Fire Service



November 22-23, 2025

IFSI Training Grounds - Champaign, IL
No cost to attend.

This unique personal and professional development program is designed for US Armed Forces Veterans who have also served, are serving, or may be interested in serving as members of the fire service. The Veterans in the Fire Service Day will offer two training schedules for students (future and current). Loaner firefighting personal protective equipment (PPE) and self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) will be available for attendees.

For more information, contact Josh Lipe at lipe@illinois.edu

Veterans' Home at Quincy: Movie Set

The movie *Death of a Brewer* was filmed at the Veterans' Home at Quincy on August 26th. The library became "Mercy Hospital," and four actors and a crew of nearly 40 people were on the Home's campus for the afternoon. The movie is based on S.C. Sherman's book *Beer Money: A Tale of the Iowa City Beer Mafia*. The historical fiction is set during the 1880s clash between the prohibitionists and the three most powerful brewers in Iowa City, known as "The Beer Mafia". It blends real-life historical figures with compelling fictional characters. *Death of a Brewer* is a tale of love, deception, and the struggle for freedom in a town torn between its vices and virtues.



Veterans' Home at Manteno: Home Bike Across America Trophy Presentation



IDVA Director and Home Administrator Tanya Smith presents the trophy for Bike Across America to Anthony 'TR' Sparenberg, Marine Corps veteran.

The Manteno Veterans Home Bike Across America is a challenge between two teams, Green and Purple, of veterans competing to bike 125 miles or 875 laps on the Manteno Home's campus. After three months of riding, the Green Team achieved its goal. IDVA Director Terry Prince presented the trophy to Anthony "TR" Sparenberg, Marine Corps veteran, of the green team. The veterans enjoyed a hot dog bar and cake to celebrate the victory. "The veterans engaged in a spirited competition to reach the ambitious goals of 125 miles of bike riding," said Home Administrator Tanya Smith. "The camaraderie and physical fitness are valuable to the overall well-being of the participating veterans."

The competition, established by the Restorative Nursing Department, is an opportunity for physical exercise and fellowship. The Home offers eight different styles of bikes for veterans to choose from based on their abilities and comfort.

Visit to the Veterans' Home at Anna



IDVA Director Terry Prince, Veterans' Home at Anna Administrator Amy Keistler, Senior Home Administrator Angie Simmons, and IDVA Chief of Staff Jassen Strokosch visit the Anna Home, where they toured construction updates and visited with veterans.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Women Veterans



*Veteran Service Officer Tanya Reyes
at the Military Women's Memorial.*

Veteran Service Officer Tanya Reyes (DesPlaines) participated in a four-day Honor Flight trip to Washington, DC, hosted by the Veterans Network Committee of Northern Illinois from August 21-24. The flight departed from Mitchell Airport in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and landed at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, where it was greeted by enthusiastic civilians and members of the VFW and American Legion. The group toured the national monuments, the nation's Capital, Marine Corps Base Quantico, the National Museum of the United States Army at Fort Belvoir, and the National Air and Space Smithsonian Museum. They were also treated to a private viewing of the U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights at the National Archives Museum. They witnessed the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. The women on the flight were honored at the Military Women's Memorial. The Honor Flight was welcomed home by a water cannon salute, cheers, and a police escort, and 80 motorcycle freedom riders escorted them back to McHenry High School, where they were presented with a red carnation and a thank-you note from U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth. A full auditorium of friends and family greeted them, along with cheerleaders, the band, and the choir.

"Every veteran should experience a welcome home ceremony," said Reyes. "I was tearfully happy that our veterans, especially our Vietnam Veterans, finally got the Welcome Home they deserve."

Six Triple Eight Day in Illinois

Director Terry Prince and Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson present the Governor's Proclamation declaring August 10, 2025, as the Six Triple Eight Day in Illinois at the Leave No Veteran Behind National Rodeo in Chicago. The Six Triple Eight Central Postal Directory Battalion, known as the "Six Triple Eight," was the only all Black, all-female battalion deployed in the European Theater of Operations in World War II. The battalion processed over 17 million pieces of mail in three months, restoring a vital lifeline between the front lines and the home front. The 688th received long-overdue recognition for its role in the war effort, culminating in the awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor in the United States. The proclamation included, "Whereas, the State of Illinois recognizes the historical significance of these trailblazing women, both for their military service and for breaking barriers of race and gender in a time of widespread discrimination."

The Leave No Veteran Behind National Rodeo brought together veterans, families, and supporters and featured traditional rodeo entertainment, community engagement, and veteran recognition. This initiative is a collaboration between the State of Illinois, Cook County, and the City of Chicago, reinforcing our shared commitment to serving those who have served.



*IDVA Director Terry Prince and Women Veterans
Coordinator Margo Watson present Governor
Pritzker's Six Triple Eight Day Proclamation.*



The awards presented to the 25 Women Veteran Leaders of 2025

25 Women Veteran Leaders in 2025

IDVA continues to feature the amazing recipients of the 25 Women Veteran Leaders in 2025. The women were nominated and selected for their commitment to the women veteran community. The awards were presented at a luncheon on March 30th at Malcom X College in Chicago.



Ashtin Bader
U.S. Navy veteran

Ashtin Bader, U.S. Navy veteran, is a passionate leader within The Fallen Outdoors, a non-profit which organizes outdoor adventures including hunting, fishing, hiking, and camping for veterans, active-duty service members, and Gold Star families. She has played a pivotal role in organizing and leading outdoor

excursions that provide women veterans with connection, healing, and adventure. Her inclusive leadership style creates a safe and empowering space where all participants, regardless of experience, feel welcomed and supported.

In 2024, Ashtin and her team facilitated outdoor adventures for over 475 veterans, with Ashtin personally driving 5,326 miles to support and lead events across the region. Her unwavering commitment to the mission was instrumental in helping the organization achieve its goals.

Beyond logistics and leadership, Ashtin serves as a mentor to fellow women veterans, sharing her expertise in outdoor skills while providing encouragement and guidance. She is deeply attuned to the unique challenges women veterans face and uses her platform to advocate for expanded access to outdoor opportunities and supportive networks.



Denisse Montoya
U.S. Air Force Veteran

Denisse Montoya, U.S. Air Force Veteran, is a Peruvian American dedicated to serving her nation and community. She has offered her experience in outreach, engagement, and advocacy to support veterans and their families across Illinois. Following her tenure at the Chicago VA Medical Center from 2016 to 2021, she continues to connect veterans with essential resources.

In December 2024, she brought her voice to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Roundtable on Veterans and Military Families, championing critical issues such as increased VA staffing, improved services for women Veterans, and the expansion of bilingual outreach programs.

Denisse has been a member of the VA Women's Improvement Network and the SheForce Committee under AllenForce, which empowers women impacted by the military with tools and resources. She also volunteers with Merging Vets and Players and assists with special events at Jesse Brown VA.

She supported a resolution honoring Women Veterans Day, which was adopted by the Chicago City Council. She has led, organized, and supported impactful events, including the Women Veterans Panel Discussion – I Served Too: The Female Veteran Perspective, the Women Veterans' Conference – Sisterhood of Service, the Women Veterans VA Health Enrollment and Claims Clinic, various Resource and Employment Fairs, and the Reds, Whites, and Rosé Women Veterans Day Celebration.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Women Veterans



Veteran Service Officer Cynthia McKee, Chicago.

Woman Warrior: Service, Support, & Sisterhood

Margo Watson, IDVA Women Veterans Coordinator, Hannah Bonecutter, Senior Policy Advisor, and Cynthia McKee, Veterans Service Officer, attended the *Woman Warriors: Service, Support, & Sisterhood* event hosted by the Jesse Brown VA Women's Health Program at Malcolm X College. This empowering gathering celebrated the strength, resilience, and community of women veterans. The event featured keynote speaker Mellisa Farmer-Hill, of the Shero Coffee Club and Army Veteran, who inspired attendees with her journey of service and advocacy. The program highlighted the importance of support networks, health resources, and sisterhood among women who have served.

Illinois Achieves Bronze: #StriveFor500: Military Women's Memorial

Illinois has registered over 300 women veterans for the Military Women's Memorial, StriveFor500 campaign, placing Illinois among five states to achieve the campaign's bronze status of 300-399 registrations in 2025. The campaign's goal is to register 500 women veterans from all 50 states in its National Digital Registry. 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.

Please view this [special message from Director Terry Prince](#) inviting women veterans and Servicemembers to join the campaign.

For additional information, contact IDVA Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson, margo.watson@illinois.gov.

Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton Hosts Standing Up for Illinois: Protecting Women Roundtable

Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton hosted a roundtable which included Deputy Governor Grace Hou, Planned Parenthood of Illinois Interim President and CEO, CFO Tonya Tucker Women Employed President and CEO Cherita Ellens, Former President and CEO, Shriver Center on Poverty Law and Chair of the Cook County Commission on Women's Issues, Audra Wilson, Cheryl Picard, MSN, RNC-OB, Melissa Simon, MD, MPH, Vice Chair for Research, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Northwestern Feinberg School of Medicine to discuss the federal policy changes and the effects that will be imposed upon women in Illinois. The federal cuts will impact women's access to primary and reproductive healthcare, along with the economic implications for women from federal funding cuts.



Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton and IDVA Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson.

Hispanic Heritage Month: September 15 - October 15

Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Women Veterans Program Honors Hispanic Women in the Military

During Hispanic Heritage Month, the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Women Veterans Program celebrates the enduring contributions of Hispanic Americans to our nation's history, culture, and progress. This month, we proudly spotlight the trailblazing Hispanic women who have served—and continue to serve—with distinction in the United States Armed Forces.

From overcoming systemic barriers to breaking through ranks historically closed to them, Hispanic women veterans have demonstrated extraordinary resilience, leadership, and patriotism. Whether in combat roles, support positions, or command leadership, these women have not only defended our country but also opened doors for future generations of service members.



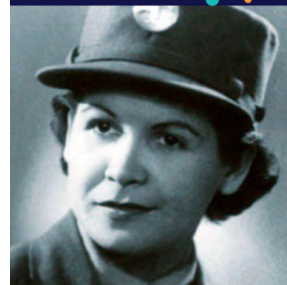
Angela Salinas
Major General, U.S. Marine Corps

Angela Salinas, Retired Major General, began her distinguished career in the United States Marine Corps in May 1974. She was among the first women to attend gender-integrated officer training and, in 1989, became the first woman to command a Marine Corps recruit station.

Salinas enlisted at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island and was initially assigned as a legal services clerk at Camp Pendleton. In 1977, she was selected for the Enlisted Commissioning Program and commissioned as a Second Lieutenant.

Following her commission, Salinas was assigned to the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point. In 1980, she returned to Parris Island, serving at the Women Recruit Training Command. Over the course of her career, she held a wide range of leadership positions, including executive officer, battalion operations officer, headquarters commander, and executive officer of a recruiting station.

After 39 years of service, Salinas retired as the highest-ranking female officer in the history of the Marine Corps at that time.



Carmen Conteras-Bozak
Women's Army Corps

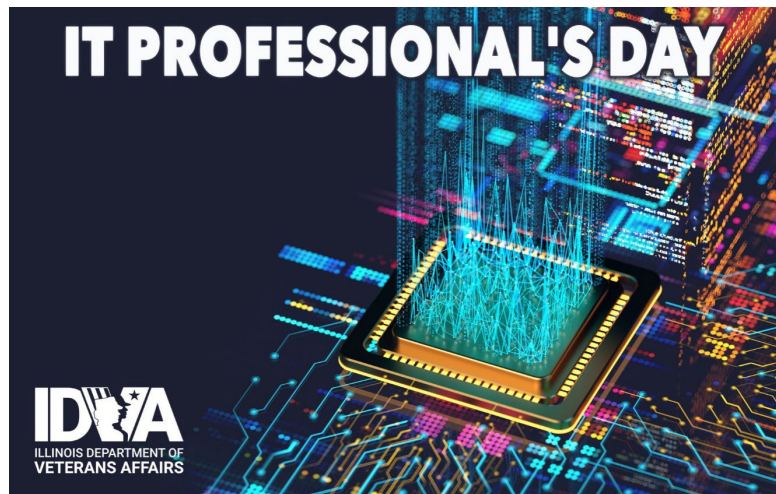
Carmen Conteras -Bozak was the first Hispanic American to serve in what would later be known as the Women's Army Corps. Serving in World War II, Conteras-Bozak was assigned to send and receive coded messages between Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's headquarters in Algiers and the battlefield in Tunisia. While stationed there, she came under German fire regularly and was later returned to the States in 1945 due to an infection.

Conteras-Bozaack was discharged with the rank of E4, and received the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, 2 Battle Stars, A WWII Victory Medal, an American Campaign Medal, A WAAC Service Medal and the Good Conduct Medal.



National IT Professionals Day

IT is the backbone of IDVA. Our IT professionals maintain our systems and troubleshoot at a moment's notice to ensure that we are equipped to serve veterans at the highest level. They don't miss a beat. Thank you for setting us up for success.



Veterans' Home at Quincy: left to right: Andrew Coulter and Terry Wise.



Veterans' Home at Chicago: Aaron Gray



Veterans' Home at Manteno: Charles "Chuck" Gowler

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Monthly Spotlight



The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs is grateful to its environmental services and housekeeping staff who provide a safe and clean environment for veterans to live in our five veterans' homes and for the IDVA staff to work. Their behind-the-scenes, meticulous care of our homes provides veterans with a comfortable and inviting space to live. Our offices are maintained to provide a positive and healthy work environment. **Thank you to these amazing teams.**



Veterans' Home at Quincy: Front row in front of bar, L-R: Ronda Rehfeldt, Meagan Tipton, Tina Powell, Ashley Baker, and Mary Hoelscher; Back row L-R: Bev McPike, Scott Witt, Darin Lefringhouse, Deana Lefringhouse, Jennifer Fantz, Colette Douglas, Jessica Kennedy, Chris Dever, Unit Coordinator, Denise Rigg, and Taylor Gilker



Veterans' Home at Quincy: L-R: Dawn Whelan, Susan DeMoss, Cindy Klingele, Christy Huner, Janie Fleer, Kim Ashby, Chris Dever, and Unit Coordinator Rhonda Lightfoot; Not available for photos: David Batterton, Brenda Gullion, Mason Hills, Michelle Hincks, Alyssa Lubbert, and Marta Mowen



Veterans' Home at Anna: Back Row L-R: Anna Aumiller, Jessica Watson, Kristina Myers, and James Mick Middle Row L-R: Housekeeping Lead Tonia Sherwood, Kristin Barrett, Mechelle Greer; Front Row: Alma Redcloud; Not pictured, Chaz Hendrix



Veterans' Home at Chicago: L-R: Nelson Alcayde, Jesus Alvarez, Marquesha Bentley (Supervisor), and Sherman Elias



Veterans' Home at Manteno: Front row: Justin Schroeder, Heather Phillips, Aryana Murphy, Renee Davis, Debra Scalise, and Jason Arseneau. Back row Russel Counts, and Travis Perez.

Field Services

IDVA's Veteran Services Officers are committed to community outreach and meeting veterans where they are. These events raise awareness of the federal and state benefits and services available to veterans and how IDVA can chart a course to obtain them.



Veteran Service Officer Gerald Enriquez, Chicago, attends the LTO Homecoming Event in Country Club Hills.



Veteran Service Officer William Illa, Lake County, hosted an outreach table at the Carlinville Area Hospital Health Fair at Fort Sheridan.



Superintendent of the Macoupin County VAC, Bobby Scott & Veteran Service Officer Chad Roach (Macoupin County) attend the Carlinville Area Hospital Health Fair.



Veteran Service Officers Michele Hansen-Hoback and Dan Ebker (McLean County/ Bloomington) attended the National Guard Warrant Officer Symposium at Heartland Community College.



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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