

VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs ★ Volume 3, Issue 5 ★ August 2023



★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

August presented an important deadline for the PACT Act. Hopefully, many of you met the August 14th deadline to complete a claim or an intent to file a claim to receive benefits *retroactive* to the signing of the PACT Act on August 9, 2022. However, there is **no deadline** for filing claims, and IDVA Veteran Service Officers are poised to help you file. You can locate your closest VSO here: <https://veterans.illinois.gov/serviceoffices.html>. For more information on the

PACT Act, click here: <https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/>

Looking ahead, September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. IDVA has partnered with the Illinois Department of Human Services in the Governor's Challenge, an effort to end veteran suicide throughout Illinois and the nation. It's a crusade to reach service members, veterans, and their families with information about warning signs for crisis, how to intervene, and where to find support and counsel. Veteran crisis stemming from PTSD and hopelessness that comes from job insecurity, homelessness, addiction, and a need for better coordination in the community. It is critical that we create a safe and open space for veterans, their families and caregivers to talk about their concerns and feelings before a crisis strikes. Please take a moment to view this message on Veteran Suicide Prevention and consider how you can be a part of this critical mission. [DVA \(illinois.gov\)](https://www.idva.gov).

IDVA's mission is to ensure that veterans thrive in Illinois and the entire IDVA team is committed to their part in serving those who served. Beginning with our VSOs, who are carefully positioned to help veterans claim their earned benefits; our State Approving Agency working on education programs, to one of our five veterans' homes across the state – Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy that offer residential care to veterans and eligible spouses. We serve a broad spectrum of veterans and continuously strive to be innovative and current in this service. Please reach out to us with your ideas – we would love to hear from you: IDVA.MEDIA@illinois.gov.

As always, thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

Sincerely, **Terry Prince**, IDVA Director



Contract negotiations and signing

“We are pleased that we have a signed contract with AFSCME, our union partner,” said Director Prince. “It is integral that our employees are represented well and that we look out for your benefits and work/life balance. Our intention is for our union employees to feel supported and that we create a positive, approachable work environment. We strive for them to feel proud about the work they do for our precious veterans. They are motivated to put their best foot forward to help IDVA achieve its mission of helping veterans thrive in Illinois.”



From left to right: Chief Fiscal Officer Steph HeckenKamp, former Human Resources Director Tammy Showers, IDVA Director Terry Prince, Labor Relations Manager Alicia Harris, and Senior Home Administrator Angela Simmons.

Student Veteran Leader of the Year

The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) and the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH) named Ryan Russell, a 2023 graduate of Rock Valley College (RVC), the Illinois Student Veteran of the Year. IDVA Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn and Dan Wellman, Illinois MOPH State Senior Vice Commander and IDVA Veterans Education and Training Services Administrator presented Russell with the award on Wednesday, July 26th.

"This year's nominees from campuses across the state of Illinois were all outstanding leaders in their communities and were worthy of recognition," said Assistant Director Vaughn, "But Ryan's record of leadership at Rock Valley College and in the Rockford community made him stand out from the others. He represents those values which we desire to acknowledge with this award. With his commitment to leading and serving, we are honored to recognize him at the 2022-2023 Illinois Student Veteran Leader of the Year."

The purpose of the Illinois Student Veteran Leader of the Year Award is to recognize student veterans for the quality of their engagement with their college/university and/or the wider community. Recipients portray both strong leadership characteristics and excellence in academics. They serve as role models for the student veteran body by volunteering, participating in events, academic achievement, reaching out to fellow student veterans, and portraying an overall positive attitude. This is the fourth year the award has been presented, and Ryan is the first community college recipient of the award.

Russell, a 2020 graduate of Byron High School, began his military career in the United States Air Force and is currently serving in the Air National Guard as a munitions systems technician. He completed his Associate of Arts Degree while serving as a member of the RVC Student Veterans of America Chapter, where he served as the vice-president and president. During his time at RVC, Russell was a member of RVC's chapter of the national honor society, Phi Theta Kappa, and the RVC Student Government Association. In addition, he was a student worker in the RVC Veterans Affairs office and served as the college's Student Trustee during the 2022-2023 academic year. This spring, Russell received the Eagle Award of Excellence in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the student category.

Russell was nominated by Milana Herman, RVC Program Manager for Veterans and Student Employment, who included in her nominating letter, that after Russell was completed with enrollment, he asked, "Now that we've got that out of the way, how can I help you and the veteran community here on campus?"

In addition to his leadership and involvement on campus, Russell is also very involved in the community. He currently serves on the board of the Vets Drop-In Center and has facilitated partnerships with local VFWs, AMVETS and the National Women Veterans United Rockford SheVet chapter. Through his efforts, he has helped to raise funds for initiatives such as the Veterans Smile Program, Rock House Kids, and free bus passes for veterans.



IDVA Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn, Recipient Ryan Russell, Rock Valley College President Dr. Howard Spearman, and Illinois MOPH State Senior Vice Commander and IDVA Veterans Education and Training Services Administrator Dan Wellman.



Historic Legislation Benefiting Veterans Signed by Governor JB Pritzker

At the end of July into early August, the Governor signed a series of bills related to veterans, service members, and their families. These bills focused on a state-charter process for veterans service organizations ([HB 925](#)), civil no-contact orders for victims and survivors of military sexual assault ([HB 3103](#)), informational notifications on opportunities for reimbursement for professional licenses for military spouses ([HB 3295](#)), the Flag Display Act ([SB 1072](#)), death certificates for individuals with military service ([HB 2856](#)) and animal adoption fees ([HB 2500](#)). In this edition of *Veterans Connections*, we are going to highlight HB2856 and HB 2500.

HB 2856 (now Public Act 103-406): HB 2856 amends the Vital Records Act. It provides that a death certificate may include (or may be amended) to include whether a military service-related injury or illness contributed to the cause of death. This bill becomes effective 1/1/2025.

Sometimes, when a veteran dies, it is very clear that the veteran's death was related to their service-connected disability. Other times, the medical professional filling out the death certificate form might miss a connection between the cause of death and a veteran's service-connected disability. For example, a rare condition obtained during service that is related to toxic exposure might be very easy to identify. A link between cancer caused by toxic exposure from time of service and the veteran's death might not be as easy to link.

When the cause of death is not clearly linked, a surviving spouse needs to work with an accredited VSO to file a claim for benefits. A death certificate is the primary document the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) wants to see. The change made with HB 2856 will create a new question and section on the death certificate for this and could be an important indicator to the USDVA when death certificates are being reviewed for DIC claims.

When a veteran dies, a spouse may be eligible for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). DIC is a tax-free monthly benefit paid to eligible survivors of military service members who died in the line of duty or eligible survivors of veterans whose death resulted from a service-related injury or disease. To be eligible for this benefit, the claimant(s) must be the eligible surviving spouse or dependent child of a military service member or veteran.

HB 2500 (now Public Act 103-434): HB 2500 amends the Animal Welfare Act to provide that an animal shelter or animal control facility "shall" waive the adoption fee for a dog or cat if the person adopting the dog or cat does the following:

1. Presents one of the following: a current and valid Illinois driver's license with the word "veteran" printed on its face, a current and valid Illinois identification card with the word "veteran" printed on its face, or an identification card issued under the federal Veterans Identification Card Act of 2015 and a valid Illinois driver's license or valid Illinois Identification Card.
2. Complies with the adoption policies of the facility. An animal shelter or animal control facility may limit the number of adoptions to one dog or cat per veteran in a two-year period. Pet adoption fees vary across organizations, and this bill *requires* facilities to waive the adoption fee for eligible veterans.

Veterans' Homes



Veterans' Home at Anna Enhancement Project Underway

The Veterans' Home at Anna, located on 16 acres in Union County, has been serving veterans since 1994. The smallest Illinois Veterans' Home, it is home to 50 skilled nursing residents and 12 residents in domiciliary units and undergoing a nearly \$3 million construction project slated for completion in 2025. The project includes replacing HVAC units on the rooftop and resident's rooms, windows in the residents' rooms, and replacing metal doors with glass doors. It will also include conversion of bathing areas into a spa-like atmosphere with spa tubs and special lighting. Additionally, renovation of a public restroom and new lighting in outside common areas. These renovations will elevate the residents' daily comfort and the new windows and doors will brighten bedrooms and living spaces. This project is part of the state's commitment to investing in the five Veterans' Homes across the state to ensure residents live in well-maintained and modern homes.

Local Veterans' Benefits and Programs from A to Z Course Offered at Rock Valley Community College

IDVA Veteran Service Officer Matt Taylor will be teaching a class about VA Benefits at Rock Valley College (RCV) on Wednesday, September 13th from 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM.

Course Description:

Matthew Taylor and Milana Herman, Program Manager of Veterans Affairs at RVC, will address local veteran programs. Matthew will discuss VA Health Care and the VA Benefits Administration Program. His goal is to provide solid, objective resources for applications and resources. Handouts will be made available. He will also discuss the Illinois Veterans Grant for Education and IDVA's five Veterans' Homes. Milana will talk about benefits available for veterans at Rock Valley College. The college is authorized to process federal, state, and DoD military education benefits.

For more information and to register: https://rockvalleycollege.edu/_resources/files/CLR-2023-Fall-Catalog.pdf - (page 28)



Veteran Service Officers of Winnebago County Debbie Fuehrer and Michael Jay reach out to the community at the Boone County Fair. To call or make an appointment with Debbie or Michael, contact:

VSO: Debbie Fuehrer Ph: (815) 633-5875 Email: Debbie.Fuehrer@illinois.gov

Hours of Operation: 8:30AM to 3:30PM Monday-Friday by appointment.

VSO: Michael Jay Ph: 815-633-8266 Email: Michael.Jay@illinois.gov

Hours of Operation: 8:30AM to 4:30PM Monday- Friday by appointment.



Left to right: VSO Debbie Fuehrer, Elizabeth Rose Carville, Interim Superintendent Veterans Assistance Commission of Boone County, and IDVA Northern Region Supervisor Melissa Beckford.



On Wednesday, July 26th Metro Region Supervisor Robert Iverson and the former IDVA Chief of Staff Melissa Black attended Governor Pritzker's signing of HB 2831, which codified the Interagency Task Force on Homelessness, Community Advisory Council on Homelessness and Office to Prevent and End Homelessness. IDVA is an active participant on the task force and is dedicated to developing solutions for homeless veterans in Illinois.

This article was submitted in whole by the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve

ESGR: A communication bridge between National Guard and Reservists and their civilian employers

Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) is a Department of Defense (DoD) program that promotes and helps develop supportive workplaces for Reserve Component Service members in Illinois through education, recognition, mediation, and advocacy to increase awareness of applicable laws. Why is this important? Nearly half the United States military force is made up of National Guard and Reservists, all of whom have civilian employers. Support for and recognition of these employers helps bolster our national security by ensuring that this all-volunteer force is always ready.

EDUCATION

ESGR informs Service Members, and their civilian employers, of their rights and responsibilities under USERRA: the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, striving to increase awareness of all applicable laws and policies. Statutory authority for USERRA lies with the Department of Labor. ESGR serves as a neutral, free resource to both employers and Service members.

RECOGNITION

ESGR presents Department of Defense awards to employers showing support of their National Guard and Reserve employees. This support frequently involves significant sacrifice on the part of the employer. Patriotic employers of Service members deserve to know their efforts are appreciated both by their military employees and their country.

A range of awards and levels of recognition helps demonstrate this heartfelt appreciation: the Patriot Award, the Above and Beyond Award, the Pro Patria Award – only presented to three employers in each state for exceptional support—and the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award, the highest honor the DoD can give to employers for outstanding support of their National Guard and Reserve employees. For more information, visit www.FreedomAward.mil.

MEDIATION

ESGR has hundreds of trained volunteer ombudsmen throughout the county ready to provide information and cost-free mediation. Many employment conflicts arise through misunderstanding rather than purposeful violation of USERRA, and ESGR can help both prevent and resolve such issues.

ADVOCACY

ESGR promotes the importance of employer support through regular communications to military leadership. We act as a communication link between employers and the DoD, serving as the employers' principal advocate with the military.

How can an employer show public support for our military?

Employers can sign and display an ESGR Statement of Support (SoS). By signing an SoS, employers make these commitments:

We fully recognize, honor and comply with the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA).

We will provide our managers and supervisors with the tools they need to effectively manage those employees who serve in the Guard and Reserve.

We appreciate the values, leadership and unique skills Service Members bring to the workforce and will encourage opportunities to employ Guardsmen, Reservists, transitioning Service Members and veterans.



We will continually recognize and support our country's Service Members and their families in peace, in crisis, and in war.

To request your Statement of Support, visit www.ESGR.mil/SoS.

What does ESGR provide?

For employers, ESGR offers copies of the full USERRA statute, law reviews, the Federal Code of Regulations for USERRA Implementation (a non-technical guide to understanding the law) and a free downloadable USERRA poster. On our website, www.ESGR.mil, employers can find free online USERRA training. And ESGR volunteers will visit your workplace and provide USERRA training, along with the chance to ask any questions that arise.

For Service Members, ESGR provides samples of military leave-of-absence forms, sample letters, policies, and tips to help avoid employment challenges. ESGR volunteers attend mobilization/demobilization briefings to answer questions, provide wallet cards and other resources to help clarify your USERRA rights and responsibilities. And ESGR volunteers will brief your unit to offer more in-depth discussion, as well as the opportunity to get answers and additional help with specific situations.

The Illinois ESGR committee offers all the above, all at no cost to you. You may call ESGR for any of the resources named here, ask questions, even schedule a USERRA briefing at your workplace call: **1-800-336-4590**.

How can I help?

You can become one of the 4500 ESGR volunteers across the country! Illinois ESGR would be delighted to welcome you as you offer your time and talents to help improve employer relations for the brave men and women who put their careers on hold, leave their families and place themselves in harm's way as they work to preserve our way of life. When you volunteer with ESGR, you not only support your community and our Nation's defense, but also get many opportunities to network with business owners, civic leaders, and senior military officials. Help with Employer Outreach, developing relationships with employers to promote advocacy for military service. Assist with Military Outreach by educating military members on how to manage their USERRA rights and responsibilities. Be an Ombudsman by receiving special training to assist with resolving employer/Service member misunderstandings. You can also offer your talents to Illinois ESGR in Public Affairs, showcasing the ESGR mission in our own social media, and helping media organizations promote public understanding of our work.

Visit Illinois ESGR on Facebook and on LinkedIn:

<https://www.facebook.com/IllinoisESGR>

Monthly Highlights



Veterans and Gold Star Family Days at the Springfield State Fair

Veterans and Gold Star Families Day at the Springfield State Fair was a great success! The first Gold Star Family brunch was co-hosted by the Military Order of the Purple Heart and IDVA. Former Governor Patrick Quinn, Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton, State Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart Joe Schaler, and IDVA Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn shared remarks. The program concluded with the traditional yellow rose ceremony. Among the veterans attending the main program was Marvin Hamilton, a 99-year old Army Air Forces/Corps and Air Force veteran of the Vietnam War, World War II, and the Korean War. Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton presented him with the official Governor's proclamation declaring August 13th Veterans Day at the State Fair. The afternoon was filled with musical entertainment. We thank all the veterans who attended and hope they enjoyed their day at the Fair.



Senior Program Policy Advisor Crystal Womack spoke at the Purple Heart Ceremony hosted by the Military Order of the Purple Heart/Hayes/Krell Memorial Chapter 159 on August 5th at the Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield.



IDVA Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn, Veteran Marvin Hamilton, and Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton.



Former Governor Pat Quinn and Gay Eisenhauer/Hero: Wyatt D. Eisenhauer



State Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart Joe Schaler



Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton with (left to right) IDVA Legislative Liaison Sara Augustinas, IDVA Senior Home Administrator Angela Simmons, IDVA Senior Program Policy Advisor Crystal Womack, IDVA Assistant Director Anthony Vaughn, IDVA Operations and Programs Division Manager Danielle N. Luevano, and Brigadier General, Mark G. Alessia, Director of the Joint Staff - Illinois National Guard.

Monthly Highlights

Veterans and Gold Star Family Days at the DuQuoin State Fair

Veterans and Gold Star Families Day at the DuQuoin State Fair was a great success. The program included remarks from the DuQuoin Mayor Joshua Downs, Illinois Department of Agriculture Director Jerry Costello, and IDVA Director Terry Prince. The Gold Star Ceremony rose ceremony honored heroes and their families. IDVA VSOs were on hand to help veterans with questions and the Veterans' Home at Anna team was well represented. Lunch was enjoyed by veterans and their families.



Fields Services Manager and Master of Ceremony Mark Patterson reads the Governor's Proclamation declaring Veterans and Gold Star Families Day at the DuQuoin State Fair along with Director Terry Prince.



Veterans' Home at Anna Team from left to right: Director of Nursing Shelly Miller, Administrator Amy Keistler, Director, Angie Simmons, Assistant Director of Nursing Lori Godwin.



Southern Region Supervisor Jeffrey Lewis, VSO Tina Griffiths, IDVA Director Terry Prince, and VSO Dax Griffith.

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 about poor performance 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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