

**VETERANS ASSISTANCE COMMISSION
OF
WILL COUNTY, ILLINOIS**



ANNUAL REPORT

2023

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December 31, 2023

State of Illinois
The Honorable JB Pritzker
207 State House
Springfield, Illinois 62706-0001

Dear Governor Pritzker,

It is with great pleasure to present you with the annual report of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Will County, Illinois, pursuant to Chapter 330, Part 45, Section 8 of the Illinois Compiled Statutes.

With 26,958 veterans, Will County has the fourth highest veteran population in Illinois. The Veterans Assistance Commission of Will County (VACWC) has the privilege of providing services in the following categories:

- Veteran Advocacy
- Veteran Financial Assistance
- Veteran Benefits and Compensation Assistance

In 2023 the VACWC assisted 3,134 veterans, their dependents, and their survivors to obtain the benefits they earned from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This resulted in \$6,594,978.16 in return to the veterans and the community. The VACWC is proud to be the only Veterans Assistance Commission in Illinois to work alongside the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA). This collaboration benefits Will County veterans by having an IDVA service officer within the VACWC office to provide benefits and information on the state level.

The VACWC continues to be the foremost veteran advocacy agency in Illinois. Our cooperative relationships with local service agencies, and our collaboration with the VA, gives us the opportunity to assist Will County veterans, their dependents, and their survivors with their individual needs and unique challenges that are specific to this population.

Thank you for your support of our county's veterans. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions, comments, or concerns.

Very Respectfully,

Jennifer Solum
Superintendent

Will County Veterans Assistance Commission Posts

1. American Legion Post 5 Harwood
2. American Legion Post 13 Plainfield
3. American Legion Post 18 Lockport
4. American Legion Post 39 Braidwood
5. American Legion Post 52 Romeoville
6. American Legion Post 191 Wilmington
7. American Legion Post 241 Joliet Buffalo Soldiers
8. American Legion Post 392 Peotone
9. American Legion Post 521 Steger
10. American Legion Post 935 Manhattan
11. American Legion Post 1080 Joliet
12. American Legion Post 1200 Monee
13. American Legion Post 1288 Bolingbrook
14. Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 367 Cantigny Joliet
15. Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 725 Mokena
16. Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1493 Frankfort
17. Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2199 Stone City Joliet
18. Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5422 Wilmington
19. Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5788 Lockport
20. Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5819 Lemont
21. Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5917 Bolingbrook
22. Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9545 New Lenox

Our Mission

The Veterans Assistance Commission of Will County's mission is to protect, promote, and provide services to Veterans as honorably and selflessly as they had done for us in the past.

Our Team

Jennifer Solum, Superintendent

Erik Papineau, Assistant Superintendent

Amy Georgakopoulos, Senior Veteran Service Officer

Brandon Peterson, VSO

Jeff Walsh, VSO

Aria Scott, VSO

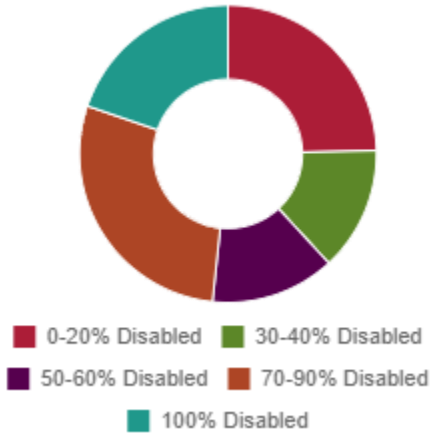
Joe Martin, Peer Support Recovery Specialist

Anna Lukasevich, Administrative Assistant

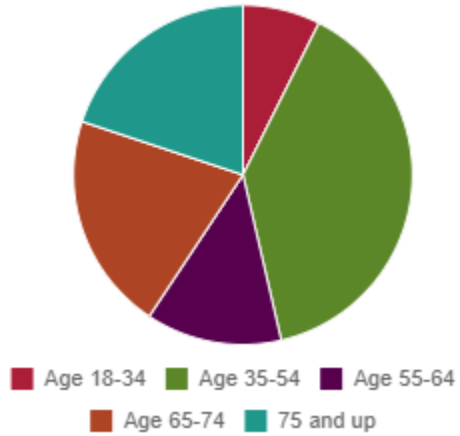
Rick Montgomery, Driver

Will County Veteran Demographics

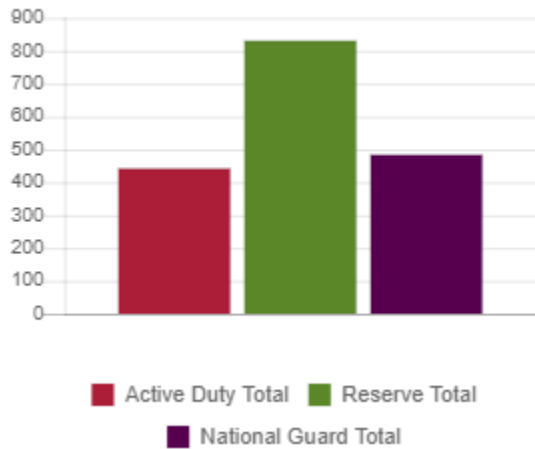
Veteran Disability Ratings



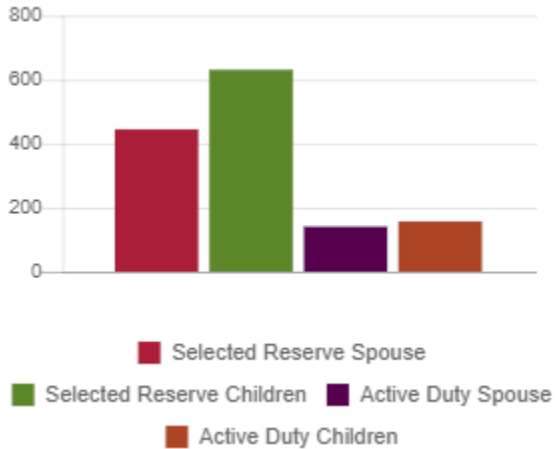
Veterans by Age Group



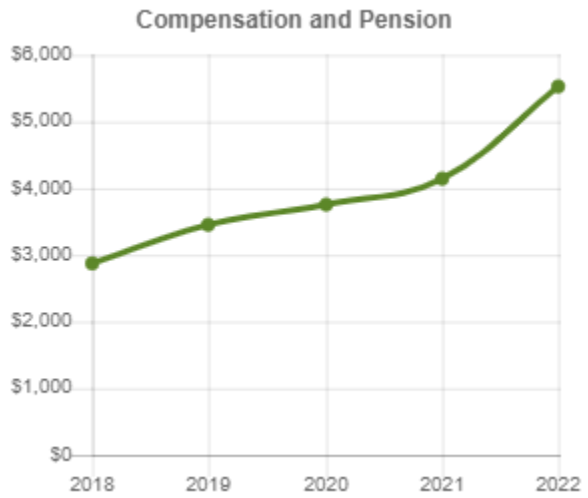
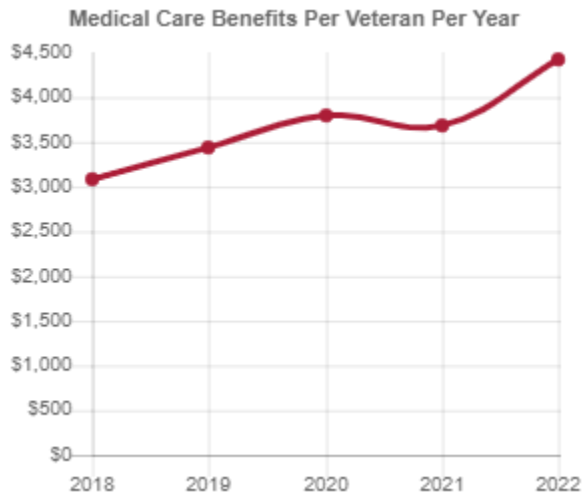
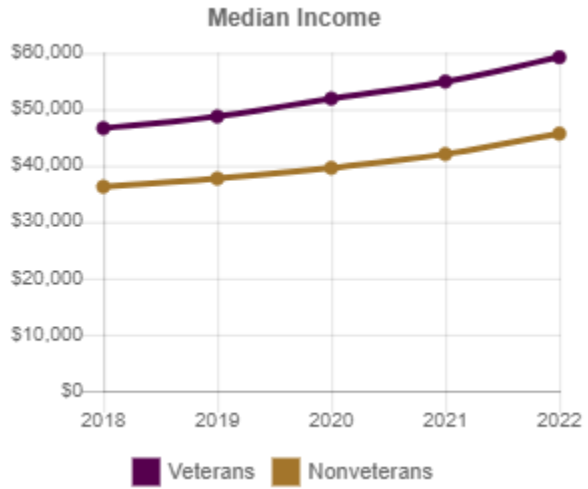
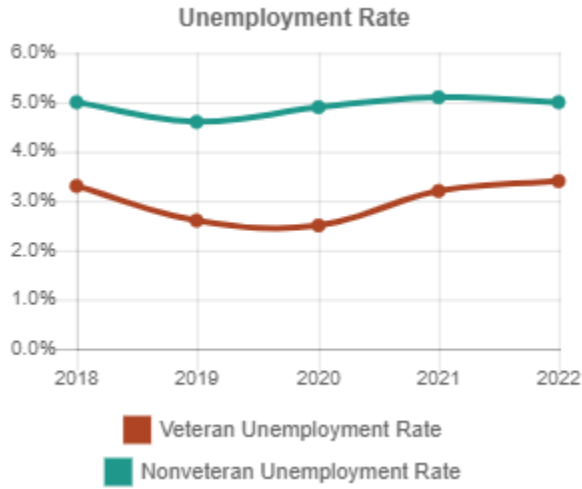
Service Member Population

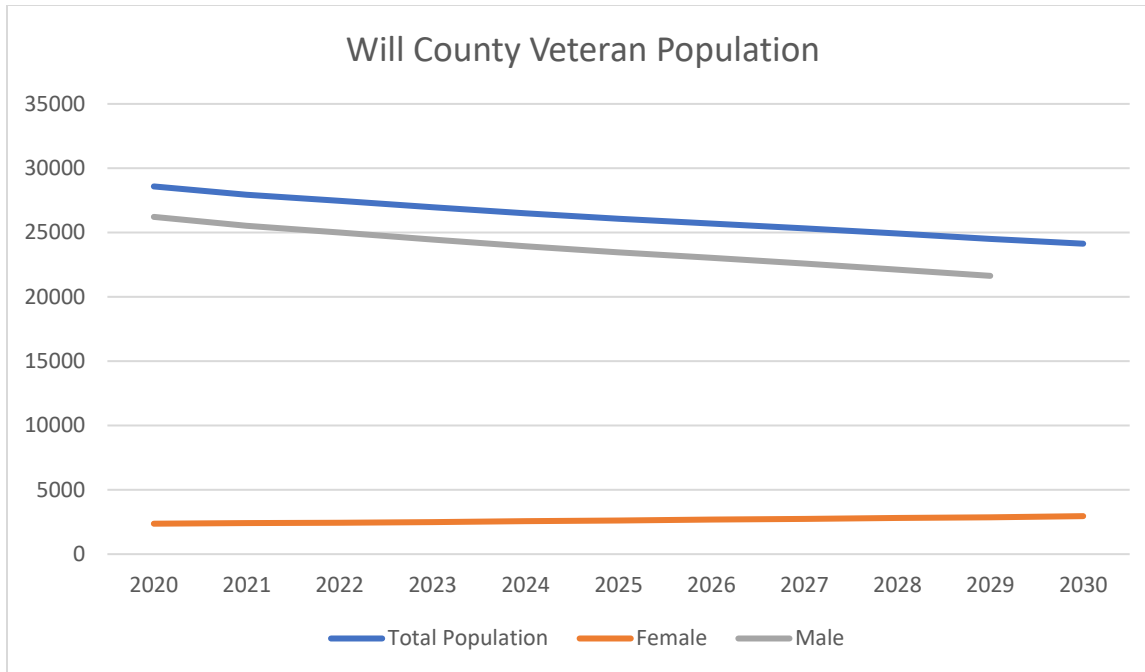


Selected Reserve & Active Duty Dependents



Will County Veteran Demographics





The Veteran Population Projection Model 2020 (VetPop2020) provides the latest official Veteran population projection from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VetPop2020 is a deterministic projection model developed by the office of Analytics Service to estimate and project the Veteran Population. Year (FY)2020 to FY2050.

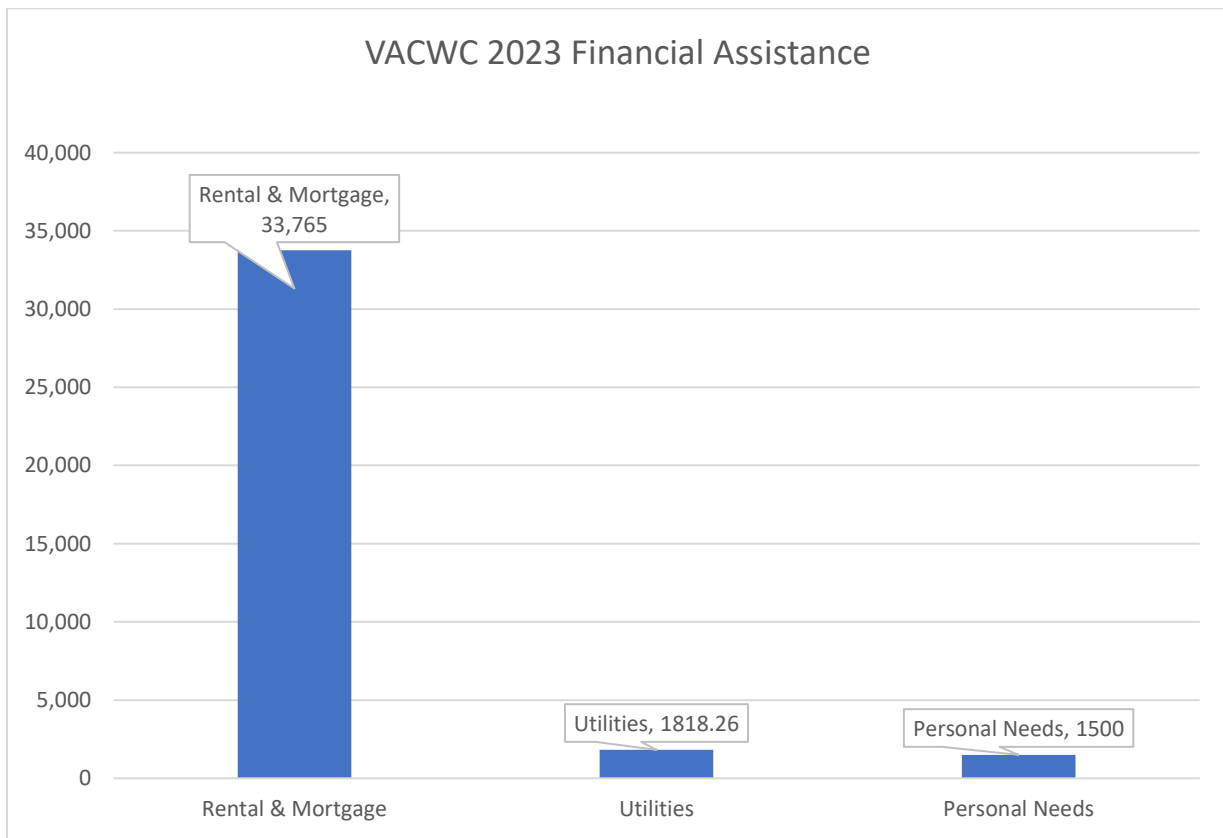
Veteran Financial Assistance

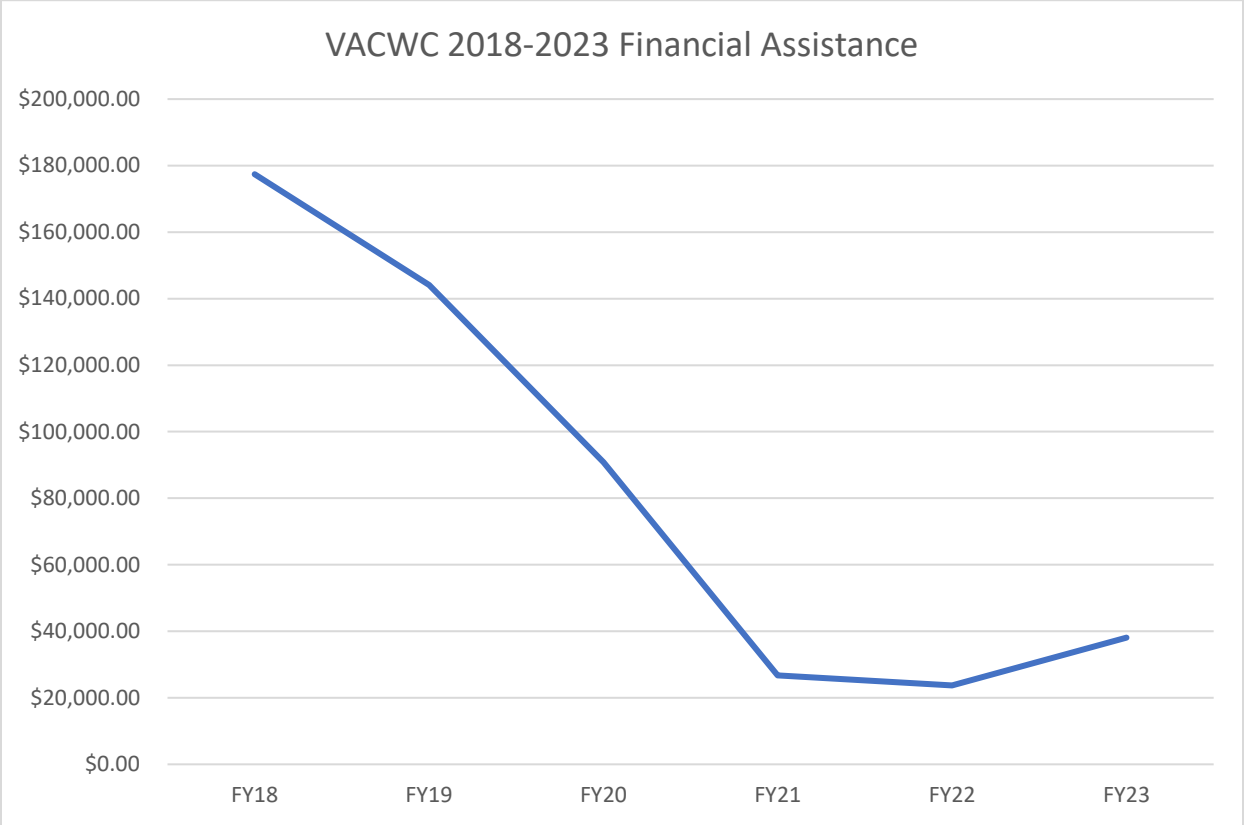
Veteran Financial Assistance is available to Will County Veterans, their dependents, and surviving spouses that fall below the 150% Federal Poverty Level. The financial assistance is allotted directly to the vendors for rent/mortgage, utilities, and personal needs. The VACWC requires each participant to sign a contract and adhere to the VACWC financial assistance policies.

Every veteran, family member, or surviving spouse, if needed, may utilize the shower and the food pantry in the office. Hygiene items and food are donated throughout the year from various local partners and residents.

This year, the VACWC provided \$38,082.86 in financial assistance, representing \$33,764.60 in rental and mortgage assistance, \$1,818.26 in utility assistance, and \$1,500 in personal needs to indigent Veterans and their families.

In 2020, an update to the VACWC financial assistance policy limited eligibility resulting in a significant decrease in benefit disbursement. Several factors have caused an increase in the need for financial assistance: inflation, lack of housing inventory, loss of employment, and veterans on a fixed income. In 2024, the VACWC will review the financial assistance policy to make benefits more accessible to veterans in need.





Transportation

The VACWC has a transportation program that provides rides to veterans for medical appointments at VA facilities or private medical centers. The VACWC has 2 vans, of which 1 is wheelchair accessible. The wheelchair accessible minivan gives us the opportunity to provide transportation for veterans with mobility issues. In 2023, the VACWC provided veterans more than 200 roundtrip rides to medical appointments at VA facilities or private medical centers.

Veteran Peer Support Specialist

Recovery Meetings

Joseph Martin is an Army Veteran who joined our team in 2021 as the Veteran Peer Support Specialist. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the need in the community for support with mental health and addiction recovery. Joe runs a weekly “Time for a Change” Veteran Outreach Peer Support Recovery Group with an average of 5-7 veterans in attendance. In October 2023, Joe earned an additional certification, Peer Support Specialist.

Homeless Prevention

The primary objective of our homeless prevention program is to house veterans and ensure they are on a path towards stable and supportive permanent housing. Joe is also the coordinator and first point of contact for veterans and their families who are facing homelessness. Joe plays a vital role in connecting the veterans with VA resources to assist in transitioning into permanent housing. Every Wednesday afternoon at the VACWC, in collaboration with Hines VA, Volunteers of America, Midwest Shelter for Homeless Veterans, and other partnering agencies, walk-in appointments are available for veterans and their families to meet with a housing coordinator. On average, the team meets with 4 new veterans and their families who are “literally homeless” per week. During this appointment, eligible veterans are enrolled in VA healthcare, evaluated for the VASH program and/or rapid rehousing, and for drug/alcohol treatment if needed. If needed, the team will coordinate inpatient treatment through Hines VAMC, or services through Stepping Stones Treatment Center. In addition, if needed, admission to Daybreak or Morning Star Mission shelters is arranged. During this process they are also screened for eligibility for VACWC financial assistance, as well as VA compensation claims. In 2023, 192 veterans and their family members were assisted through this program.

Veterans Treatment Court

Joe is the liaison for the VACWC with the Will County Veterans Treatment Court. The mission of the Veterans and Servicemembers Court is to provide qualifying individuals mental health, mental disorder and/or substance abuse treatment through judicial intervention utilizing a collaborative, non-adversarial approach to promote public safety. As a Peer Support Recovery

Specialist, Joe has an integral role in supporting the veteran to ensure their success. Joe collaborates and meets weekly with the program Psychologist, Probation Officer, and Social Workers to make sure the veteran is on the path to success.

Partnering Agencies Within the VACWC

The VACWC is proud to be the only Veterans Assistance Commission in Illinois to share an office with the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA). Working collaboratively with IDVA and their Veteran Service Officers gives us a unique opportunity to conveniently provide veterans access to different benefits available throughout the state.

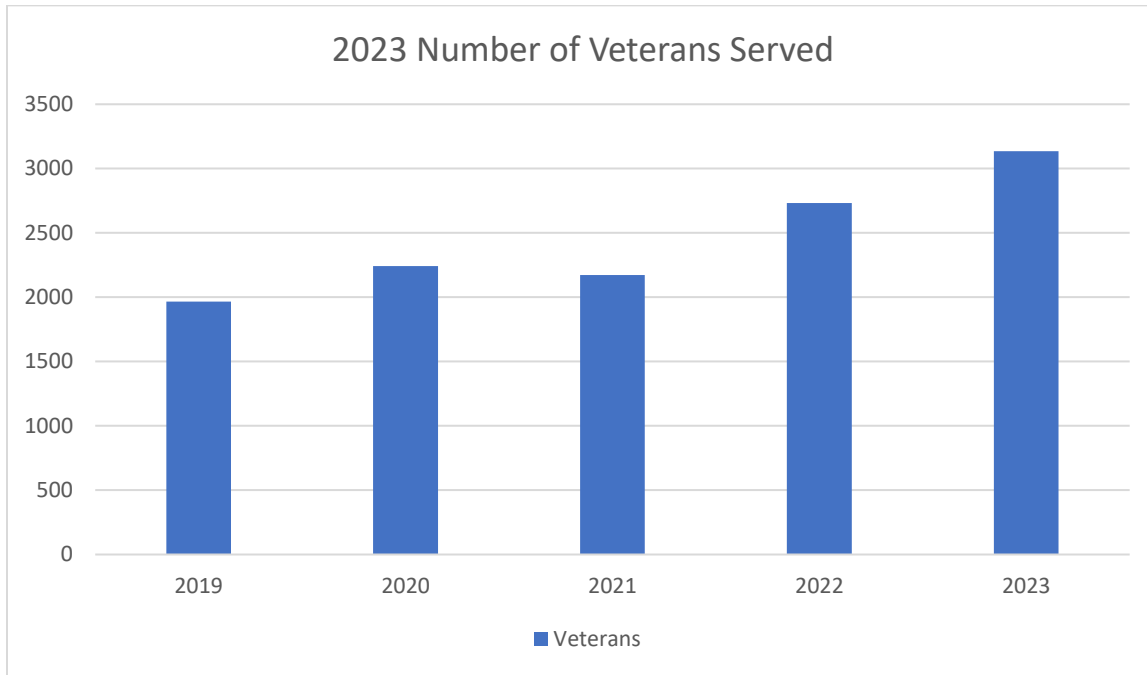
The VACWC also hosts the Orland Park Vet Center (OPVC) in our office Monday – Thursday. OPVC provides veterans with combat and/or MST counseling, referrals, and community engagement. OPVC services are available at no cost, regardless of discharge character, and without the need to enroll in VA Healthcare, or be in receipt of a service-connected disability.

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Department of Veterans Affairs Benefits Assistance

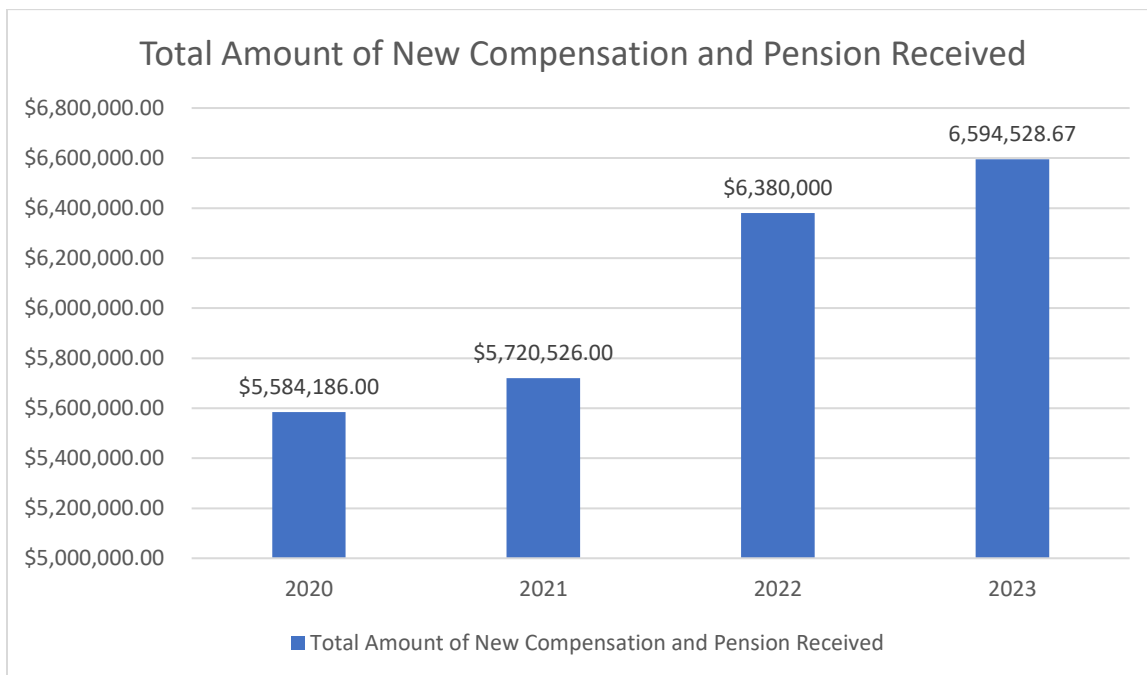
Advocating on behalf of Veterans involves assisting with the filing of claims for compensation, pension, education, and healthcare to local, state, and federal agencies including the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Veteran Service Officers (VSO) at the VACWC are accredited through the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers, and cross-accredited with the VFW, DAV, and American Legion.

The number of veterans served by the VACWC in 2023 was higher than the preceding years, and the total annual award amount reflects the increase of benefits. This increase was a result of the expansion of VA benefits and programs, return to our pre-pandemic outreach initiatives, and the hard work and dedication of the VACWC team.

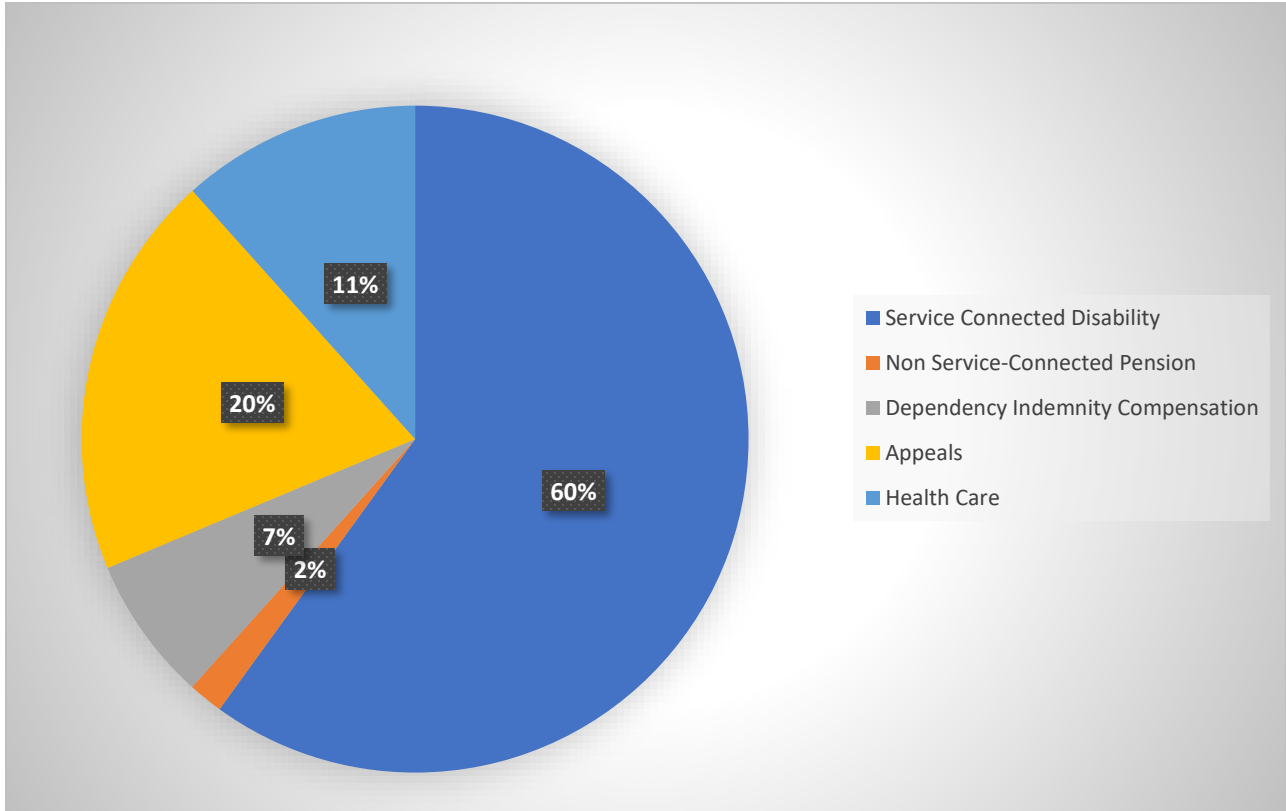


The number of veterans served is representative of the individual veteran, not the number of separate times the VACWC had contact with them.

VACWC Annual Awards



New Claims Filed by Category 2023



| Type | 2023 | 2022 |
|------------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Service-Connected Disability | 964 | 687 |
| Non Service-Connected Pension | 26 | 21 |
| Dependency Indemnity Compensation | 108 | 86 |
| Appeals | 284 | 266 |
| Health Care | 170 | 137 |

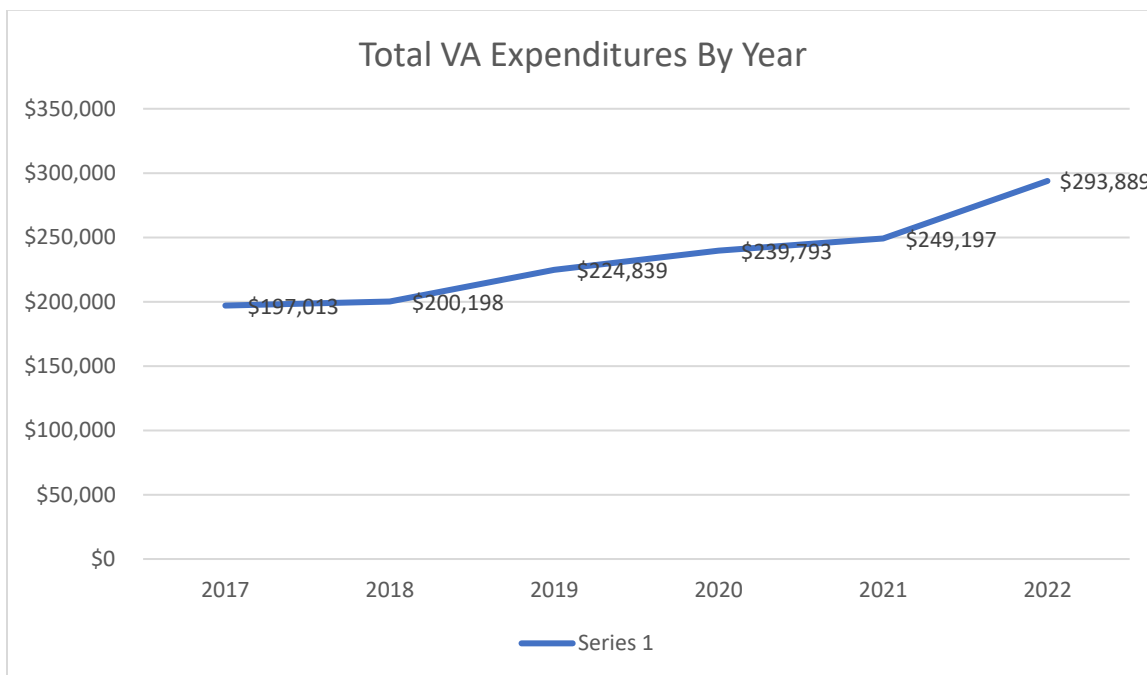
Will County Property Tax Homestead Exemptions for Veterans with Disabilities FY22

| \$2500 Reduction | | | \$5000 Reduction | | | 100% Tax Exempt | | |
|-------------------------|------------|----------------|-------------------------|------------|----------------|------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| # | EAV | Average | # | EAV | Average | # | EAV | Average |
| 261 | 652,500 | 2,500 | 303 | 1,515,000 | 5,000 | 2,500 | 226,670,916 | 90,668 |

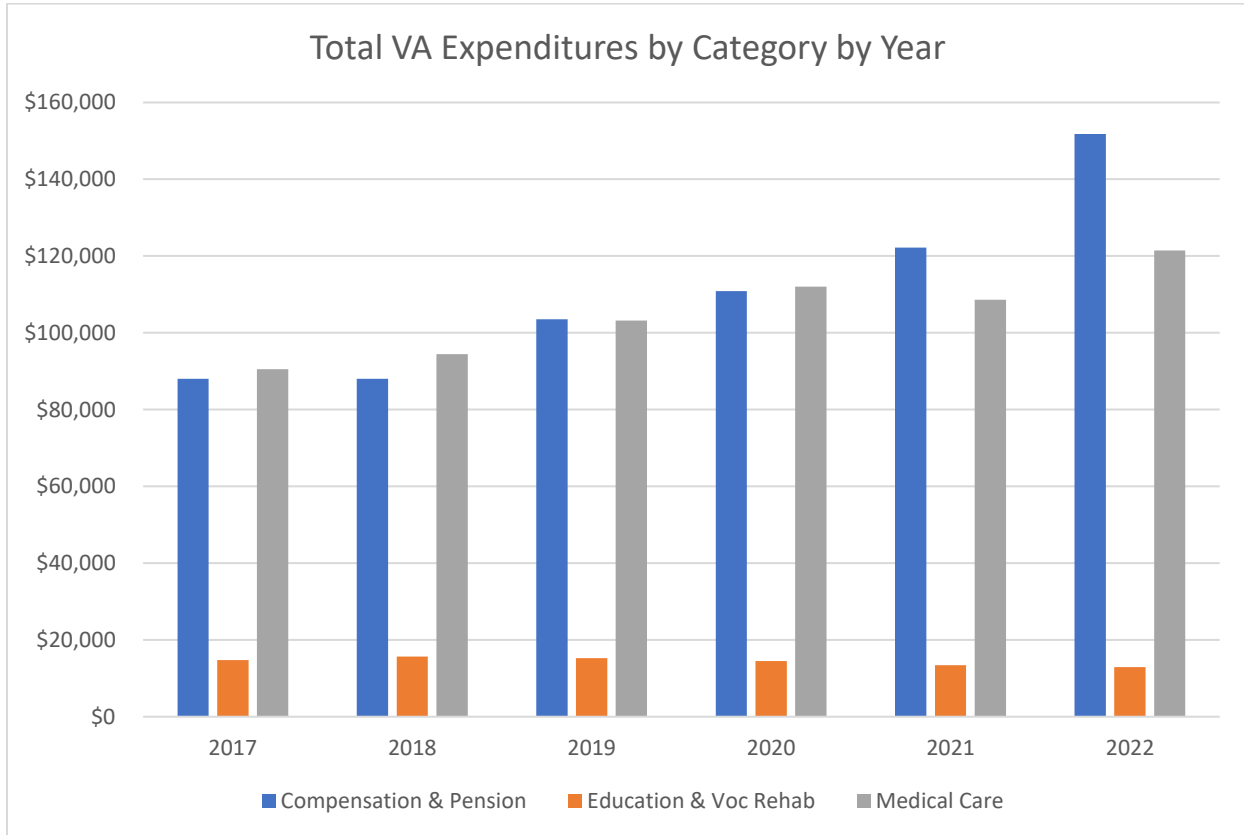
<https://tax.illinois.gov/research/taxstats/propertytaxstatistics.html>

VA Geographical Distribution of Expenditures in Will County

Each Fiscal Year, the Department of Veterans Affairs’ Office of Enterprise Integration publishes the Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures report. This report provides the estimated dollar expenditures for major VA programs at the state, county, and Congressional District levels. Expenditure data are grouped by the following categories: Compensation and Pension, Education and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, Insurance and Indemnities, General Operating Expenditures, and Medical Care.



Total VA Expenditures in Will County by Federal Fiscal Year <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/expenditures.asp>



Total VA Expenditures in Will County by Category by Federal Fiscal Year <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/expenditures.asp>

| Year | Compensation & Pension | Education & Voc Rehab | Medical Care |
|------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| 2017 | \$88,000 | \$14,765 | \$90,489 |
| 2018 | \$87,994 | \$15,679 | \$94,438 |
| 2019 | \$103,571 | \$15,242 | \$103,171 |
| 2020 | \$110,849 | \$14,535 | \$112,041 |
| 2021 | \$122,184 | \$13,395 | \$108,622 |
| 2022 | \$151,778 | \$12,906 | \$121,474 |

Total VA Expenditures in Will County by Category by Federal Fiscal Year <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/expenditures.asp>

Outreach

The VACWC understands the significant role outreach and community engagement have in reaching as many veterans as possible in Will County. Being visible and present in the community gives us the opportunity to educate veterans and their families about benefits and resources available to them. We remain committed to engaging in community partnerships, and to expand our outreach in 2024.

VACWC staff have participated in many events to include, but not limited to:

- Governor State University Community Day
- Volunteers of America Veteran Stand Down
- Monthly Peotone American Legion VSO Outreach
- Warrior Care Program
- Will County Senior Services
- American Legion Post 52 Thanksgiving Luncheon
- Meijer's Heroes Helping Heroes
- VetFest
- Rock n Roll History Museum
- Will County Fair
- Hope Manor Stand Down
- Operation Firm Handshake
- IDVA Resource Fair

The VACWC has made many strides in 2023, and with the support of the Commission, Will County Board, and Will County Executive, we will continue in 2024. This year, we initiated a records management program in accordance with Illinois State regulations that will significantly reduce the amount of paper and storage space used by utilizing an electronic records management system.

In 2023 the VACWC focused on re-engaging and establishing partnerships with community agencies and local non-profit organizations to maximize resources for veterans. One example is our partnership with the Northern Illinois Food Bank to provide regular deliveries of nutritious food to senior veterans in Will County.

The VACWC also partnered with local non-profit organizations such as: Project Headspace and Timing, K9s for Vets, AllenForce, and Joliet Police Battle Buddy Program. In September, the VACWC, K9s for Vets, and Joliet Police Battle Buddy Program hosted VetFest, an outreach event to raise awareness of local veteran organizations that work to end veteran suicide.

In May, we were fortunate to receive a donated dog to serve as an emotional support animal for the veterans we serve at the VACWC. Charli is a Cane Corso; she is a gentle giant who loves to be with people. Charli is a valued addition to our team and is loved by the veterans we serve.



The VACWC recognized there is a gap in mental health services provided by the VA for veterans and their families. The United States has endured 2 decades of ongoing warfare, and significant concerns have been raised about the mental health of veterans. Access to mental health care is limited by several factors, and the VACWC plans to fill those gaps by initiating a mental health program. In 2023 the VACWC Commission approved a new position for a mental health coordinator, and the program will be implemented in 2024. The goal of the mental health program is to collaborate with other agencies that support the specific challenges of the veteran population to fill the gap in services.

Feedback From Our Consumers

“I told her I went through your office for the application process, and she told me you did a great job. That following the audiologist in Frankfort saying YOU specifically were one of the best VSOs ever. All of that coupled with your patience with my repeated questions about forms 21-4142 and 21-4142A as requested by the VA, make me truly appreciate your continued service to veterans and to this country.”

“Yesterday, I had an appointment with a vet who has been utilizing our office for the past year. He wanted me to forward his compliments regarding Anna’s professionalism and attitude. His interaction with Anna was very pleasant and believed Anna was a great addition to our office”.

“Our meeting was very helpful -- Will stay in touch”.

“I don’t know if you remember me but a few years ago I needed help with my kids and I was struggling. I never got the chance to say Thank you for everything you had done for me. You really helped me so much and I’m so grateful that you are who you are”.

“Just want to say thank you for all your assistance with everything. You all have impacted my family’s lives for the better”.



References

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4. VA Monday Morning Workload
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8. Illinois Department of Employment Security Monthly Veterans Report
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10. U.S. Census Bureau statistics
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11. Disabled Veteran Property Tax
<https://tax.illinois.gov/research/taxstats/propertytaxstatistics.html>