



:..... **2024 ANNUAL REPORT**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WELCOME FROM JENNIFER SOLUM	2
ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE	3
VETERAN SERVICE POSTS	3
OUR MISSION	4
FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE	4
WILL COUNTY DEMOGRAPHICS	5
HELPING THOSE IN NEED	6
VETERAN SERVICE OFFICERS	6
ANNUAL AWARDS REPORT	7
ADVOCACY REPORTS	8
VETFEST 2024	9
COPPERFIELD BUILDING	10
MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES	10
ADDITIONAL SERVICES	11
OUTREACH EVENTS	11
PARTNERING AGENCIES	12
HONORABLE MENTIONS	12
REFERENCES	12

WELCOME FROM Jennifer Solum

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 26,162 veterans, Will County has the third 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 2024, the VACWC assisted 3,857 veterans, their dependents, and their survivors to obtain the benefits they earned from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This resulted in \$10,809,228.23 in new benefits returned 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

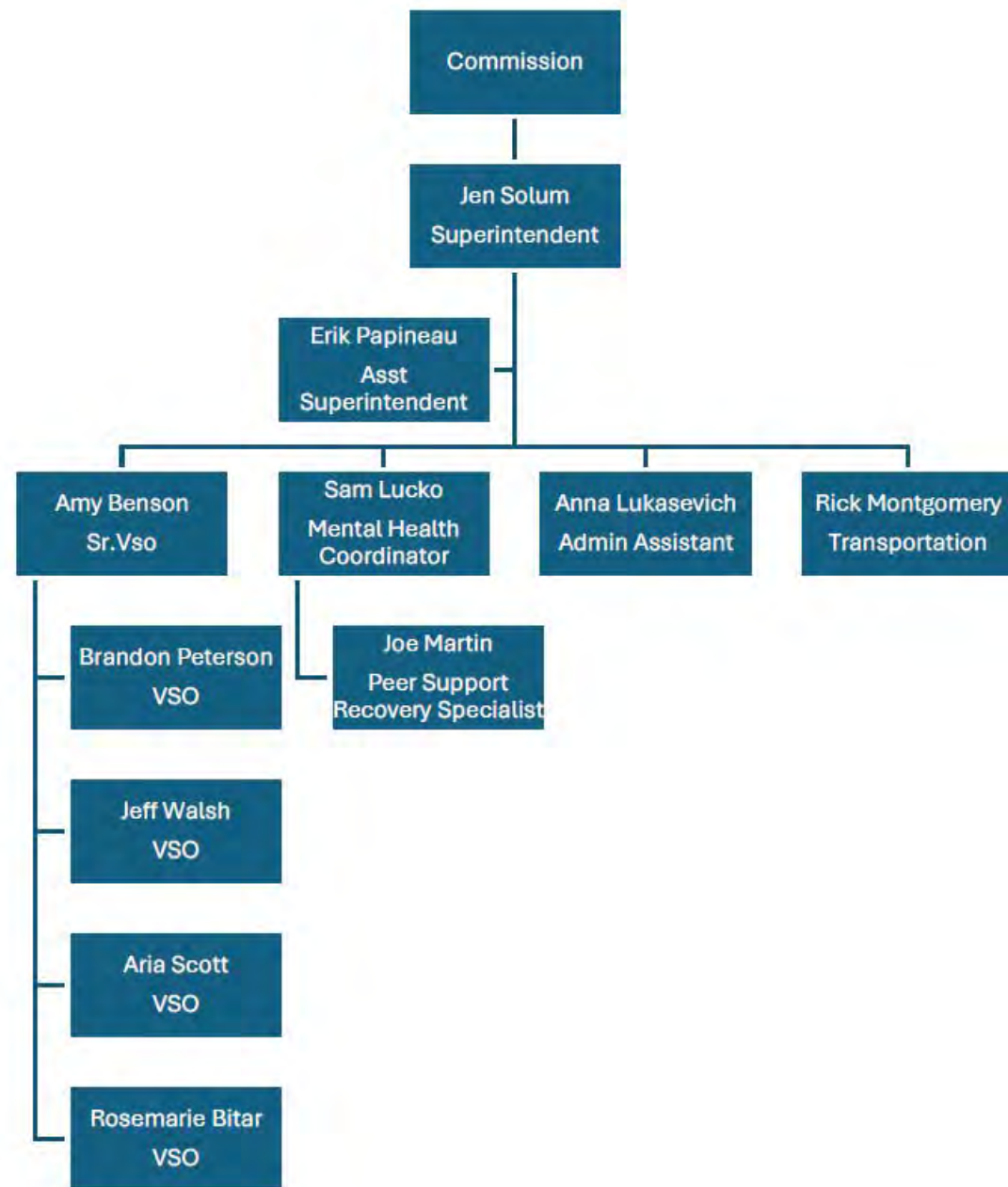


— Jennifer Solum
Will County VAC Superintendent
Air Force Veteran

THANK YOU TO OUR COMMISSION BOARD MEMBERS FOR A SUCCESSFUL YEAR!

President	Larry Shaver	American Legion 1288 Bolingbrook
Vice President	Robert Angone	American Legion 935 Manhattan
SGT-at-Arms	Mike White	American Legion 241 Buffalo Soldiers Joliet
Secretary	Heather Falkenthal	Appointed
Judge Advocate	Lisa McGlasson	American Legion 935 Manhattan
Chaplain	Jim Clausen	VFW Post 367 Cantigny Joliet
Delegate	Dennis Havranek	VFW Post 367 Cantigny Joliet
Delegate	Joseph Kelley	American Legion Post 5 Joliet
Alternate	John Hornitos	American Legion Post 5 Joliet
Delegate	Richard Todd	American Legion Post 13 Plainfield
Alternate	Raj Pillai	American Legion Post 13 Plainfield
Delegate	Mike Meyers	American Legion Post 18 Lockport
Alternate	Frank Digiovanni	American Legion Post 18 Lockport
Delegate	Steven Daley	American Legion Post 52 Romeoville
Alternate	Ernie Breitbarth	American Legion Post 52 Romeoville
Delegate	Frank Mylniec	American Legion Post 191 Wilmington
Delegate	Robert Krueger	American Legion Post 392 Peotone
Alternate	Rick Bolanowski	American Legion Post 392 Peotone
Delegate	Paul Cravens	VFW Post 725 Mokena
Alternate	James Hogan	VFW Post 725 Mokena
Alternate	Wayne Macejak	American Legion 1288 Bolingbrook
Delegate	Tony Arellano	American Legion Post 1080 Joliet
Alternate	George Madden	American Legion Post 1080 Joliet
Delegate	Mark Razny	American Legion Post 1977
Alternate	Patrick McLeod	American Legion Post 1977
Delegate	Kevin Pomykala	VFW Post 2199 Stone City Joliet
Alternate	Larry Smith	VFW Post 2199 Stone City Joliet
Delegate	Walter Wink	VFW Post 5422 Wilmington
Alternate	Scott Durano	VFW Post 5422 Wilmington
Delegate	Keith Carberry	VFW Post 5788 Lockport
Alternate	Mark Bowman	VFW Post 5788 Lockport
Delegate	Kenneth Griffin	VFW Post 5819 Lemont
Delegate	John Davin	VFW Post 5917 Bolingbrook
Alternate	Gregory Palmer	VFW Post 5917 Bolingbrook
Delegate	Clarke Christiansen	VFW Post 9545 New Lenox
Alternate	Donald Ibarra	VFW Post 9545 New Lenox

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



VACWC VETERANS SERVICE POSTS

- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 367 Cantigny Joliet*
- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 725 Mokena*
- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1493 Frankfort*
- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2199 Stone City Joliet*
- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5422 Wilmington*
- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5788 Lockport*
- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5819 Lemont*
- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5917 Bolingbrook*
- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9545 New Lenox*
- American Legion Post 5 Harwood*
- American Legion Post 13 Plainfield*
- American Legion Post 18 Lockport*
- American Legion Post 39 Braidwood*
- American Legion Post 52 Romeoville*
- American Legion Post 191 Wilmington*
- American Legion Post 241 Joliet Buffalo Soldiers*
- American Legion Post 392 Peotone*
- American Legion Post 521 Steger*
- American Legion Post 935 Manhattan*
- American Legion Post 1080 Joliet*
- American Legion Post 1200 Monee*
- American Legion Post 1288 Bolingbrook*



"In an effort to stay connected, we host quarterly meetings and strive for VAC progression."

—LARRY SHAVER
Commission President
Marine Corps Veteran



Will County has the third largest veteran population in the state of Illinois

For more information about the VACWC, scan the QR code below.



**VETERAN VOICES:
COMMENTS FROM
VETERANS WHO HAVE
UTILIZED OUR SERVICES**

"Thank you Will County VAC. I had the best experience ever. I truly appreciate your continued service to veterans and to this country."

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

"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"

"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"

Erik Papineau, Joe Martin, Jennifer Solum, Aria Scott, Brandon Peterson, Charli, Jeff Walsh, Amy Benson, Anna Lukasevich, Rick Montgomery, Larry Shaver



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."

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES

Veteran Financial Assistance is available to Will County Veterans, their dependents, and surviving spouses that meet the eligibility criteria. The financial assistance is allotted directly to the vendors for rent/mortgage, utilities, and personal needs. The VACWC requires each participant to adhere to the VACWC financial assistance policies to maintain eligibility to receive benefits.

Every veteran, family member, or surviving spouse, if needed, may utilize 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 \$27,370.62 in financial assistance, representing \$22,258.31 in rental and mortgage assistance and \$5,112.62 in utility assistance for 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 2025, the VACWC will update the financial assistance policy to make benefits more accessible to veterans in need.



—ERIK PAPINEAU
Assistant Superintendent
Marine Corps Veteran

"I am very proud of the direction of the Will County VAC, We are providing more support to these families than we thought possible"



KEY IMPACTS & ACHIEVEMENTS:

FY24' PERFORMED MORE THAN:

\$27,370.62 TOTAL FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

\$22,258.31 RENTAL AND MORTGAGE ASSISTANCE

\$5,112.62 UTILITY ASSISTANCE

CHECK THE UPDATED 2025 FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE POLICY TO SEE IF YOU QUALIFY TODAY



CONTACT

ERIK PAPINEAU FOR MORE INFORMATION
815.740.8389
EPAPINEAU@WILLCOUNTY.GOV

WILL COUNTY DEMOGRAPHICS

WILL COUNTY HAS **26,162 VETERANS**

24,053 Male Veterans
2,475 Female Veterans

The male population is expected to decrease by an average of 1.5% and the female population is expected to increase by 3.2% each year over the next 5 years.

Over the past 5 years, the unemployment rate for veterans has been significantly lower than nonveterans. However, in more recent time, the unemployment rate between both categories has become nearly equal. The rise of veteran unemployment is concerning. The VACWC does attempt to combat this statistic by referring our clients to Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation Programs, Will County Workforce Solutions and other local job fairs.

Additionally, the median income for veterans is statically higher than non-veterans. Please note, that the median income does not include awards from the VA. Awards from the VA is not considered income.

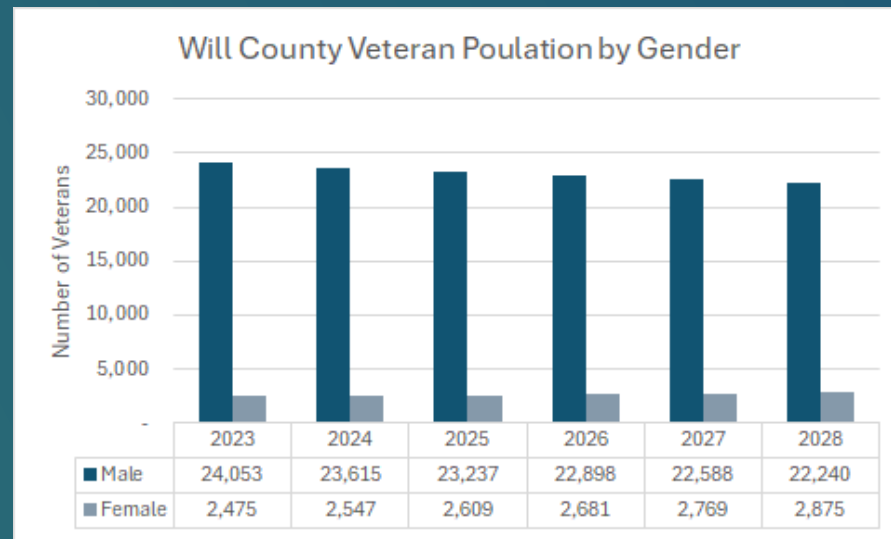


figure (a)

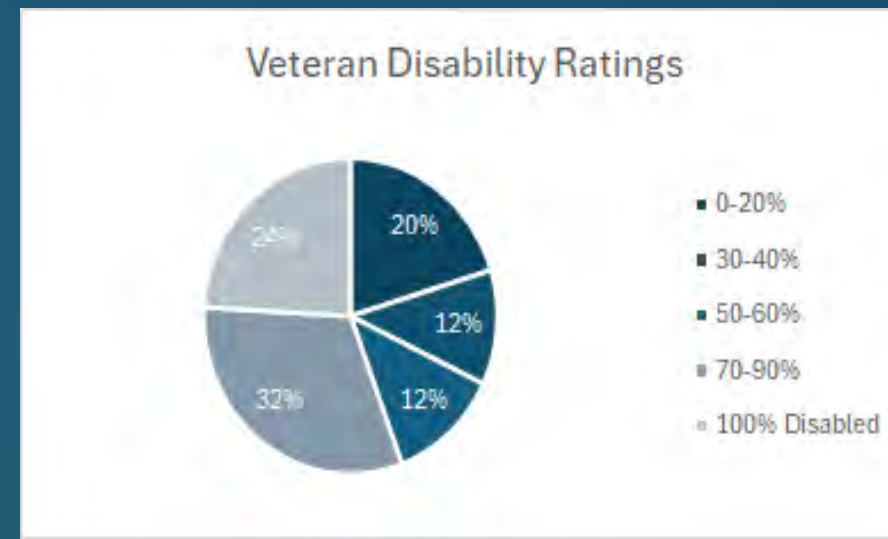


figure (d)

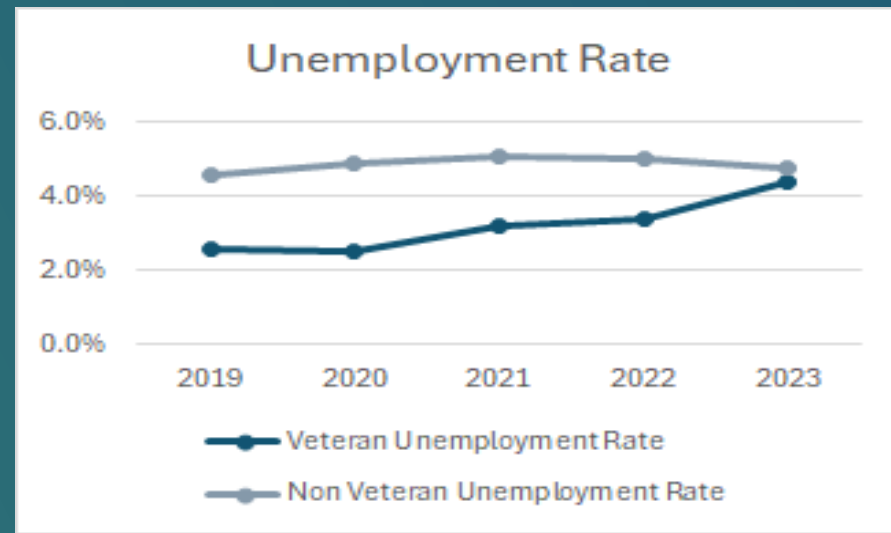


figure (b)

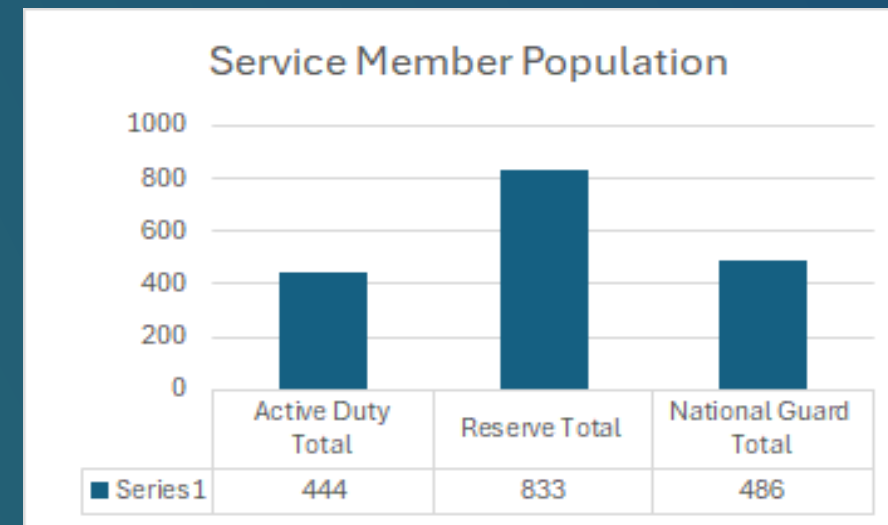


figure (e)

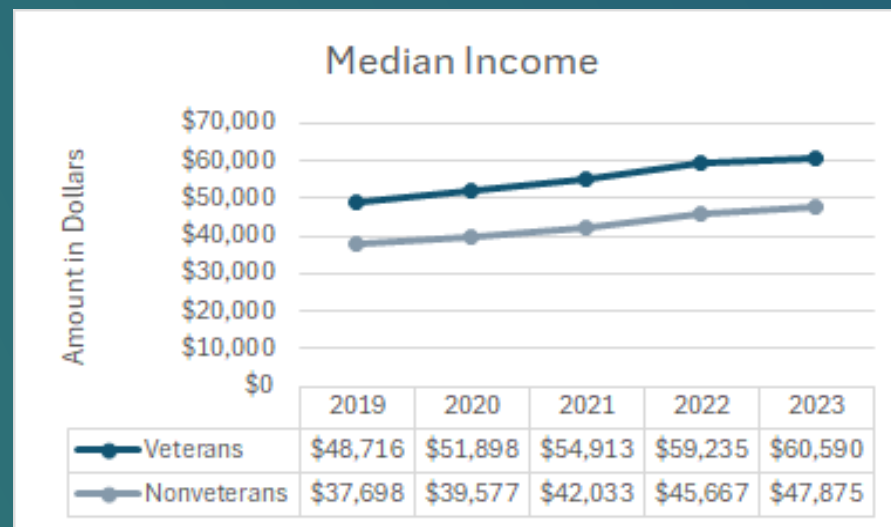


figure (c)

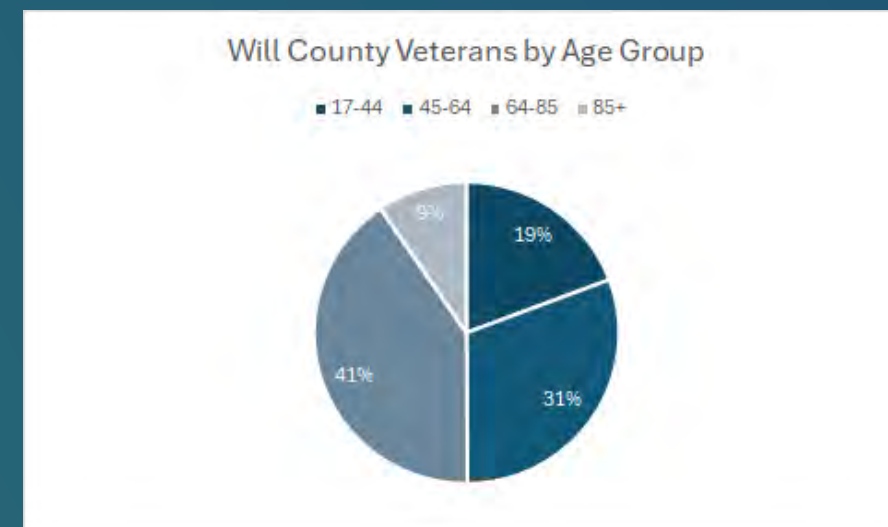


figure (f)

Figure (d) represents the percentages at which Will County veterans receive service connected disability. Service connected disability benefits are tax-free monthly payments to veterans who were injured or disabled as a direct result of their military service.

The amount of compensation a veteran receives is determined by their disability rating. Our goal is for each veteran to receive the proper compensation based off their overall physical evaluations.

Will County is also home to Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve service members. Figure (e) represents the total number of service members in each category. The VACWC actively provides outreach to these specific individuals to provide education and awareness for when they are ready to pursue benefits.

Figure (f) represents Will County veterans by age group. There are 5,112 veterans between the ages of 17-44; 8,119 veterans between the ages of 45-64; 10,760 veterans between the ages of 64-85; and 2,534 veterans over the age of 85.

HELPING THOSE IN NEED

VETERAN 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.



"We help change one Veteran's smile at a time,"
--- Joe Martin
Peer Recovery Specialist Army Veteran

VACWC FOOD PANTRY

The Will County VAC operates a dedicated food pantry to support veterans and their families in times of need. Recognizing the sacrifices made by those who have served, the pantry provides essential groceries, fresh produce, and non-perishable items to ensure no veteran or their family goes hungry. With a focus on dignity and respect, the food pantry creates a welcoming environment where veterans can access the support they deserve.

We are one of the only organizations in the area that offers fresh meat and eggs! More importantly, we keep an on-going list of families that need additional items during the holidays. This year we had an abundance of turkey and ham dinners with sides provided by Mike Meyers of the Lockport American Legion Post 18.

This vital resource is sustained through the generosity of the community, local partnerships, and volunteers committed to making a difference. Whether it's helping a veteran through a difficult month or providing consistent support to families, the Will County VAC food pantry stands as a beacon of care and compassion. Veterans in need are encouraged to visit the pantry and experience firsthand the gratitude and support of the community they've served.

HOMELESS VETERANS PROGRAM

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 HUD 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 financial assistance, as well as VA compensation claims. In 2024, 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 Service members 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.

VETERAN SERVICE OFFICERS

NACVSO ACCREDITATION

In May of 2024, WCVAC VSOs attended the 2024 NACVSO Conference in Denver, Colorado. VSOs are required by the VA Office of General Counsel to maintain accreditation in order to be a veteran advocate.

The purpose of NACVSO is to train & educate VSOs and veteran advocates in preparation, submission and representation of claims with Department of Veteran Affairs. NACVSO also advocate on behalf of veterans and eligible family members to receive the benefits in which they are rightfully earned.

Assistant Superintendent Erik Papineau earned his Certified Veterans Advocate (CVA). CVA is an advanced training certification course designed for NACVSO-Accredited Veteran Service Officers. The CVA will provide a high-level skill set unique to a CVSO to assist a claimant beyond the point of filing claims and/or Supplemental Claims or Higher Level Reviews. Will County VAC's Jennifer Solum is the NACVSO Delegate for the State of Illinois, and Senior VSO Amy Benson is a NACVSO Education Trainer.



Employees of the VACWC at NACVSO Presidential Dinner Denver, Colorado 2024

ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY VETERANS ASSISTANCE COMMISSIONS

The VACWC is a proud member of IACVAC. This organization consists of Veteran Service Officers throughout the State of Illinois. Their mission is to foster and perpetuate VAC's in all counties where viable commissions do not exist and provide information and training as necessary. They have a general oversight of the rules, laws and regulations pertinent to governing and administering the County VAC's within the State of Illinois for the benefit of military veterans and their families. Our VSOs are involved on every level. Senior VSO Amy Benson is an IACVAC Education Trainer, Assistant Superintendent Erik Papineau is the Chaplain on the IACVAC Board of Directors, and Superintendent Jennifer Solum is the IACVAC Female Veteran Representative.

VA 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 2024 was higher than the preceding years, to include 1375 first time veterans to our office. 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, addition of 4 new VSOs, and the hard work and dedication of the VACWC team and the Commission.

ANNUAL AWARDS REPORT: FY2024

Our annual award log report is a representation of the monetary benefits awarded to our clients. It is a combination of VA Benefits and WCVAC Financial Assistance.

Because we updated our system for tracking Veteran benefits, the numbers that are represented on the right are for FY 2023 and FY 2024.

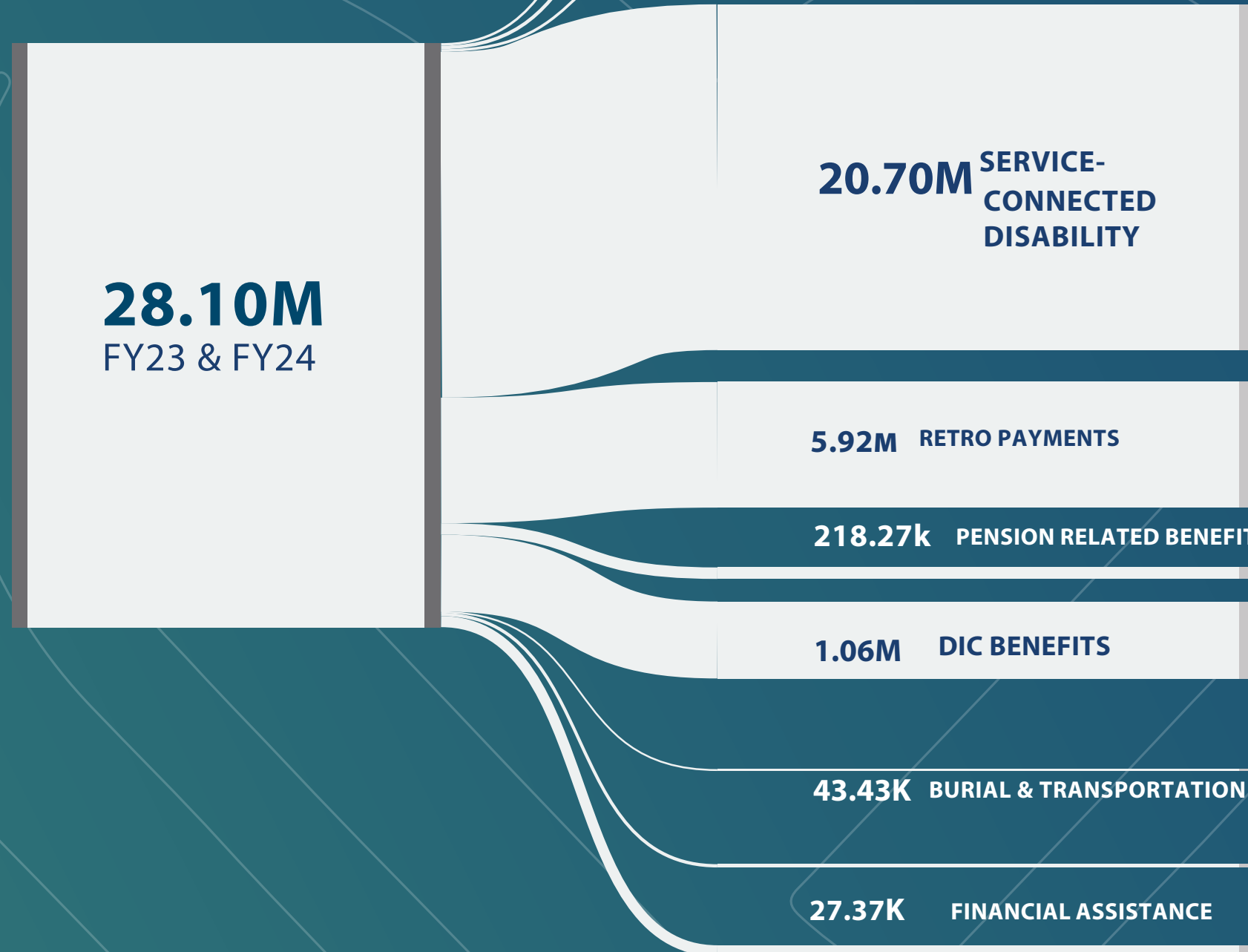
This is snapshot of our progression as of December 2024. We are pleased to have grown 119% since last year. Our services delivered 28.10 million dollars since 12/30/22, of which 10.8 million is from 2024, into the households of veterans and their families. Of that, 5.92 millions dollars includes the one-time retroactive payments into the pockets of veterans and their families.

Why the increase?

The VACWC underwent staffing changes in 2022, hired two additional VSO's in 2023, and one VSO in 2024. In a short time they were trained, accredited, and able to process claims and benefits.

On average, we are seeing 60 appointments per week, and the majority are first time claimants. The increase in new veterans is a result of our increase in outreach efforts in our community.

We have also seen an increase in claims for service connected disability since the PACT ACT of 2022. This legislation approved new presumptive conditions for the exposure to toxic environments and occupational hazards.



CONNECT VETERANS TO THE QUICKEST CLAIMS PROCESS



119% Increase since 2023
28.10M into the homes of veterans

CLAIMS SUBMITTED Quickly & Accurately



CURRENTLY WE HAVE 2185 CLAIM SUBMISSIONS
Between 12/01/2023-12/01/2024.

SUPPORT VETERANS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE PROCESS



The average claim can take 159.6 days. We provide support for the veteran all the way through to adjudication.

VETERANS HEALTH CARE BENEFITS



In addition to the claims filed with the VA, the VACWC also submitted 209 applications for VA Health Care benefits. This resulted in over 200 veterans receiving access to VA health care in our community.

ATTEND OUTREACH EVENTS



We have mobile capabilities. Our VSO's can file claims on the go. Each VSO is equipped with a Laptop, Signature Pad, and data access to VA Authorized websites

ADVOCACY REPORTS

TOTAL COMMUNICATION

Customer service is a top priority at the VACWC. On average, the service officers have 4 in-person appointments per day. Each appointment lasts for 1.5 hours to ensure quality control and assurance for each claim.

OFFICE VISITS

Figure (b) indicates the total amount of office visits, per month, for the fiscal years of 2023 and 2024. Data was not available for Sep-Nov 2023 due to a software upgrade. The data set concludes that we have nearly doubled in client visits. This notable factor is important because it translates to the 119% increase in total benefits awarded.

We attribute the increase to all the outreach events we attend, first time claimants, and *your* word of mouth for referrals. We encourage every veteran to explore the VA benefits that they may be eligible for. Our VSO's have personal one-on-one meetings with each veteran or family member to expertly research their military records and complete all necessary claim documentation.

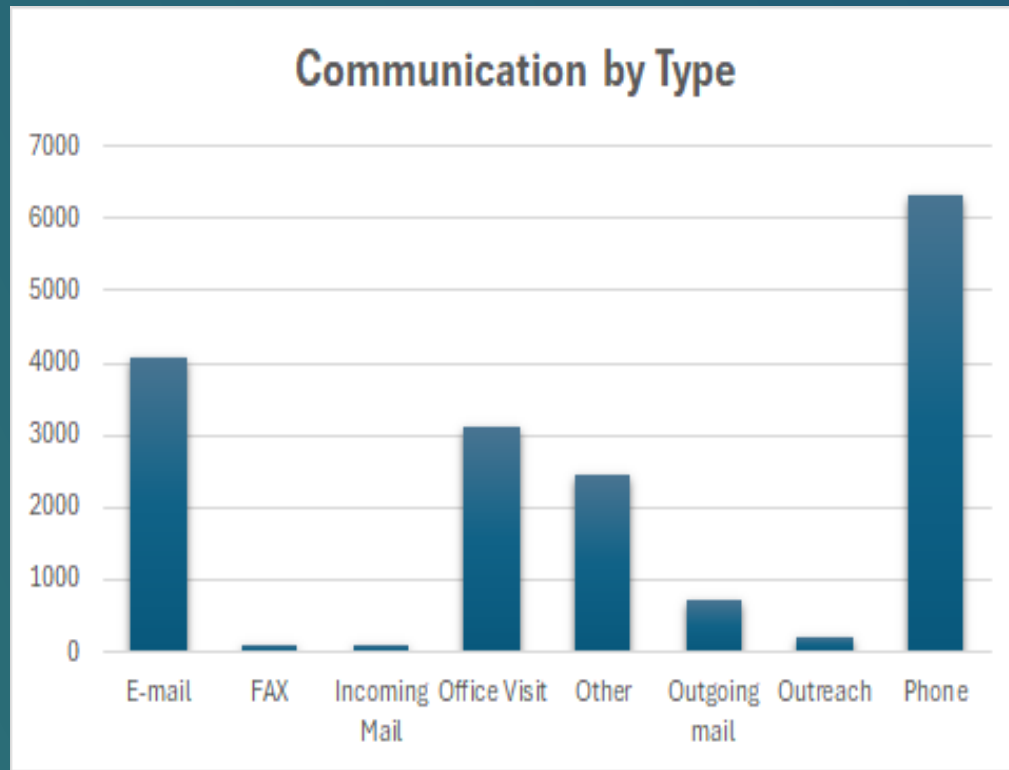


figure (a)

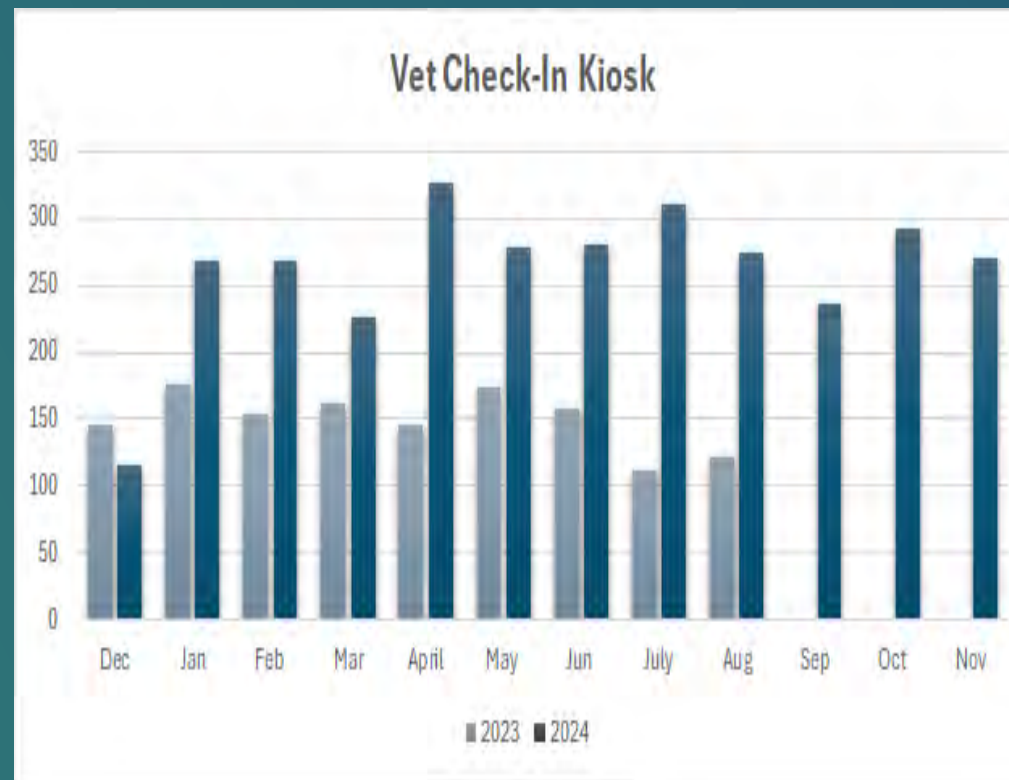


figure (b)

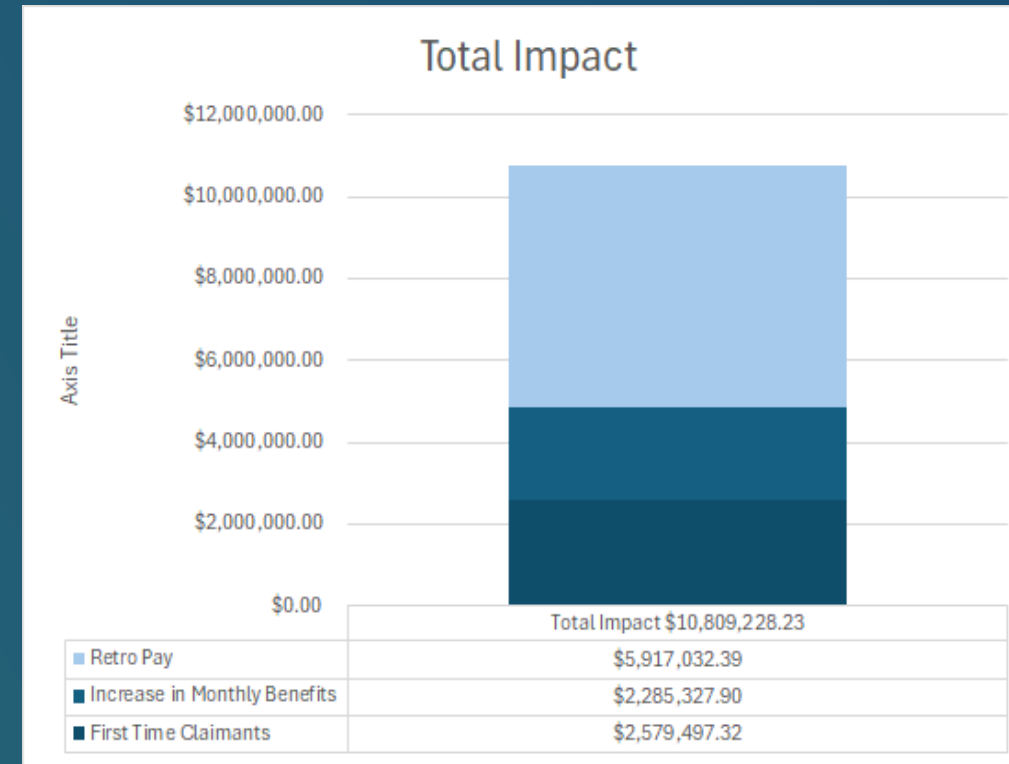


figure (c)



figure (d)

NEW BENEFITS RECEIVED

In 2024, the total amount of benefits awarded since 12/30/2022 was \$28,108,668.35. Total amount of NEW benefits paid by the VA for 2024 is \$10,809,228.23.

New benefits are broken down into three categories which include Retro payments, Increases in Monthly Benefits, and First Time Claimants.

The total impact does not include preexisting revolving payments, medical benefits, and VACWC financial assistance.

These payments are updated monthly by each VSO to ensure maximum accuracy for each veteran they assist.

CLAIM SUBMISSIONS & SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Figure (d) represents the total number of claims submitted by type. There was a total of 2,185 claim submissions this year. This figure does not represent the amount of supporting documents.

The VA claims process requires a high level of knowledge and research. The average VA claim takes 159.6 days. Each VSO is held accountable to track every claim they submit until it is adjudicated. Therefore, VSO's are constantly updating veteran profiles with new and relevant information to make for a successful claims process.

VETFEST 2024

The VACWC and the Joliet Battle Buddy Program came together to hosted the 2nd annual VetFest, an event filled with community spirit and a shared dedication to supporting our local veterans and their families.

Attendees enjoyed browsing booths from local vendors that included representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs, Will County Treasurer, Will County Auditor, Will County EMA, Will County Recorder of Deeds, Will County Sheriff's Auxiliary, local veteran organizations, and multiple police and fire departments from within Will County. All vendors offered information and assistance that is beneficial to veterans and their families, and also some fun giveaways.

Although it was a wet and rainy day, our event featured an impressive car show, showcasing vehicles that brought car enthusiasts from all around. Everyone had the opportunity to enter exciting raffles while enjoying delicious smoked barbecue.

Despite the weather, we had a great turn out and the rain further embraced the military spirits. "If it aint rainin', we aint trainin'!!" said Assistant Superintendent Erik Papineau.

The heart of VetFest was its mission: support those dedicated to veteran suicide prevention. Every dollar raised during the event was donated to AllenForce, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering veterans through health, wellness, and community reintegration programs.

Thank you to everyone who attended, volunteered, and contributed to making Vet Fest a success. Together we've made a meaningful impact on the lives of veterans and their families.



Volunteers preparing the smoker for BBQ!



Awesome rides featured in the VetFest Car Show!



Veterans, families, and local supporters enjoying homemade barbecue!



Jenifer Solum, Superintendent; William Evans, Joliet Chief of Police; Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant, Will County Executive



Truckin' 4 Veterans at VetFest with an outstanding display of military memorabilia



Members of the VACWC, Joliet Battle Buddy Program, and Will County Executive Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant present funds raised for AllenForce

THANK TO OUR SPONSORS & VOLUNTEERS!

On behalf of the VACWC, we want to extend our heartfelt gratitude for your invaluable support in making VetFest 2024 a resounding success.

Your generous sponsorship and selfless volunteerism played a pivotal role in honoring our veterans and recognizing their tremendous sacrifices. From funding event activities, helping with event logistics, preparing gift baskets, smoking the delicious pulled pork and ensuring that every attendee felt welcomed and appreciated, your dedication and hard work were truly inspiring.

Because of your contributions, we were able to host over 200 veterans and their families and raise awareness about veteran services in our region. These accomplishments are a testament to the power of a community united in gratitude and service.

We are deeply grateful for your partnership and commitment to this cause. Your support reminds our veterans that their sacrifices are not forgotten and that their stories continue to inspire generations. Thank you once again for your dedication and generosity. We look forward to collaborating with you in future endeavors to continue supporting our veterans.

- VFW Post 5819
- Expert Journey Travel
- Lockport American Legion Post 5788
- Oscars Meats Family BBQ
- American Legion Post 392
- Hampton Social Athletic Club
- Ken & Patricia Novak
- Mike & Mary White
- Mending Minds Counseling & Coaching Victory
- Today Deliverance Ministries New Beginnings
- Christ Church of Faith
- Stephen & Jennifer Solum
- VFW 725
- D'Arcy Motor Group
- Jennifer Lynch
- Eugene & Beverly Kramer
- Fantastic Ventures
- Sons of AL Bolingbrook
- Peotone American Legion



More information for VetFest 2025 Coming Soon!!

NEW BUILDING COMING SOON!

Excitement is building in the Will County veteran community as the VACWC prepares to move into its new facility at 1300 Copperfield Avenue, Joliet, Illinois. Located conveniently next door to the Joliet VA Clinic, the state-of-the-art building will allow the VACWC to expand its services and create a comprehensive one-stop shop for veterans.

The move to the new location marks a major milestone for the VACWC, which has long served as a vital resource for local veterans. By expanding its services and consolidating resources into one centralized hub, the VACWC aims to better serve the needs of Will County's growing veteran population.

"This move represents a tremendous opportunity to provide more streamlined and effective assistance to the men and women who served our country," said Erik Papineau, Assistant Superintendent. "Being right next door to the VA Clinic means veterans will have greater access to healthcare and support services all in one location."

The new facility will feature enhanced space for benefits counseling, employment assistance, housing support, mental health resources, and a functional fitness gym! Additionally, the VACWC plans to partner with local organizations to offer expanded programs for education, financial literacy, and peer support.

For many veterans, the proximity to the Joliet VA Clinic is a game-changer. The ability to access medical care and VACWC services within walking distance provides added convenience, particularly for those facing mobility or transportation challenges.

Local leaders and veterans' advocates have praised the move, citing its potential to improve outcomes for veterans and their families. "This is more than just a building," said Larry Shaver, a Marine Corps veteran and VACWC Commission President. "It's a beacon of support and community for the people who gave so much for our country."

THE EXCITEMENT IS BUILDING!

"Expanding our footprint will increase the range of services and programs we can provide as the demand for assistance has steadily risen over the years. Our existing space is limited, which has limited our ability to meet this demand. This new facility will allow veterans to interact with local, state, and federal services and resources in a single visit. We look forward to this move, which will empower our team to continue delivering exceptional service to our local veteran community."

— Jennifer Solum Will County VAC Superintendent

"Ensuring that veterans and their families have immediate access to services and resources is a top priority of county government. This move will be transformational for the VAC and other organizations, creating a single location at the heart of the county for the local veteran community to access their services. I look forward to working with the VAC staff to make this a reality."

— Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant Will County Executive

"We are grateful to the VAC for expanding their footprint on the previous Silver Cross Campus as they continue to better serve our veteran population in the region"

— Terry D'Arcy Mayor of Joliet



Future site of the VACWC; 1300
Copperfield Ave Joliet, Illinois

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Samantha Lucko, LCPC, is the dedicated Mental Health Coordinator at the VACWC. She is expanding the organization's outreach on critical mental health programs aimed at combating veteran suicide. With a renewed focus on prevention and support, Sam's initiatives are strengthening resources available to veterans while breaking down barriers to mental health care.

Under Sam's leadership, the VACWC has implemented new strategies to engage veterans, including community workshops, peer-support programs, and improved collaboration with local mental health providers. By focusing on education and intervention, the VACWC aims to identify those at risk while creating an open dialogue about mental health challenges.

"Sam's passion and dedication have been instrumental in our outreach," said Jennifer Solum, Superintendent of the VACWC. "We are seeing more veterans come forward to seek help, and that is a direct result of Sam's hard work and commitment."

The expanded programs also address the stigma surrounding mental health by encouraging open conversations and offering confidential support. The VACWC plans to increase outreach events in the coming months, ensuring veterans across the region are aware of the resources available to them.

Through Sam's efforts and the support of the community, the VACWC continues to fight for those who have served, reinforcing the message: help is always within reach.

Sam's involvement with the Will County Problem Solving Court has provided additional support for veterans while completing the program.

In 2024 Sam graduated College of DuPage's Grant Writing course. This will provide opportunities for the VACWC to offer additional programs and services for veterans and their families.



CONTACT

SAM LUCKO FOR MORE

INFORMATION

815.740.8389

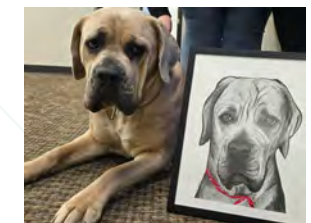
SLUCKO@WILLCOUNTY.GOV

CHARLI'S CORNER

Charli came to the VACWC in May 2023, all the way from Sioux City, Iowa. Licensed breeder Knights Cane Corsos ICCF made it their mission to donate one puppy from every litter to a veteran or a veteran service organization, and the VACWC was selected to adopt her. She lives with our Superintendent Jennifer Solum; and is co-parented by our Senior VSO Amy Benson. She can be seen lying around the office or playing ball with veterans or staff if she is not "working". She is very intuitive and has adjusted beautifully to her environment despite still being "in training". Her training is conducted by expert trainers at K9 Guardians in Lockport, Illinois. We are very proud of Charli as she is truly one of a kind!

Did you know? Cane Corso's were bred by the ancient Green Molossi tribe as far back as 1137 AD. When the Roman Empire invaded the Greek Islands, these pups were taken back to Italy and what emerged was the Cane Corso and Neapolitan Mastiff. Primarily, they accompanied soldiers into battle and provided support to the military.

The next time you stop by the VACWC office, be sure to say hi to Charli!



ADDITIONAL SERVICES

VACWC TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM

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 2024, the VACWC provided veterans more than 295 round trip rides to medical appointments at VA facilities or private medical centers.

We also use these vans to pick-up and drop-off food deliveries and for of our Helping Those in Need program. Donations come from all around. We accept our donations from local businesses such as Costco, charitable distribution centers such as Share Fest Will County, and of course all of the veteran service posts in our surrounding area. We express our gratitude to this strong community for all of the endless support and combating veteran hunger.

VACWC SCHEDULING AND APPOINTMENTS

Meet Anna Lukasevich, she has been with the VACWC for over one year. She is the first face you will see when you enter the VACWC and she is glad to help you find where you need to be. We have a quick check- in process at our automated kiosk.

In 2024 the VACWC received over 13,000 incoming calls that were greeted by Anna. She maintains the scheduling for every VSO and ensures the day to day operations of the VACWC are efficient and effective. Responding to veteran requests is a top priority and it starts at the front counter.



"It's been a great first year here. The Veterans are all so friendly. I am happy that I can be a part of their experience"

--- Anna Lukasevich
Administrative Assistant

VACWC GAS AND GIFT CARD PROGRAM

For low income families we do offer gift cards and gas cards that are donated to the VACWC throughout the year.

The gift cards that are available are limited in quantity. We rely solely on donations for this program.

If you are a vendor looking to support local veterans please contact the VACWC.

If you are a veteran and are interested in the program, talk to your VSO and and they can provide more information on eligibility.

EXPANDING VETERAN 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 2025.

Each VSO that attends these outreach events are readily equipped to receive all intake applications and schedule first time appointments.

Some of the events we attended this year include, but are not limited to the following:

- o Governor State University Community Day
- o Volunteers of America Veteran Stand Down
- o Joliet VA Clinic /CBCOC
- o Warrior Care Program
- o Will County Senior Services
- o JJC Resource Fair
- o Meijer's Heroes Helping Heroes
- o Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery
- o Rock n Roll History Museum
- o Will County Fair
- o Hope Manor Stand Down
- o Operation Firm Handshake
- o IDVA Resource Fair
- o Beer & Bourbon Fest
- o Prairie State College Resource Fair
- o Forgotten Warriors Memorial
- o Women's Veteran Retreat
- o Rebuilding Together
- o Community Cares Program



Rosemarie Bitar at Salute to our Armed Forces Event Alsip, Illinois



VAC WC supports local American Legion Riders for a Fallen Solider



Larry Smith at Wreaths Across America Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery



--Rick Montgomery, Driver



PARTNERING AGENCIES

The VACWC is fortunate to partner with Farm2Veteran. Farm2Veteran is home to a variety of livestock, a greenhouse and a garden that produces quality food for veterans in need. Through farm-fresh food, Farm2Veteran strives to play a pivotal role in the lives of veterans by supporting their nutritional needs. Farm2Veteran donated to the WCVAC two freezers and a refrigerator so we can have fresh meat and eggs available to our veterans in need. Farm2Veteran keeps the freezers and refrigerator full!

Northern Illinois Food Bank and Share Fest are two local organizations that we utilize to keep our food donation pantry full.

We have also established regular working relationships with different departments at our local VA medical centers. This allows us quick and easy access to additional VA benefits such as Vocational Rehabilitation and HUD VASH which is a collaborative program between the US Department of Housing and Department of Veteran Affairs. This program offers supportive services to homeless veterans and their families.



Gabriella Marcinowski & Elizabeth Thrun, HUD VASH Coordinators with Department of Veterans Affairs

The Joliet Police Department created their "Battle Buddy" program for veterans and active members of the military in the City of Joliet. The program has a select group of police officers who have served in various branches of the military. The Joliet police will specifically dispatch a Battle Buddy Police Officers to calls for despondent and/or suicidal veterans. Each volunteer member has taken critical incident and crisis intervention training.



Joliet Police Sargeant Chad Evans and members of the Battle Buddy Program

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.

Another great organization is Operation Team Rubicon. This is a veteran-led humanitarian organization that delivers impactful disaster relief and aid nationwide. The VACWC has teamed up with Operation Team Rubicon multiple times to assist veterans in need. This is the go to organization if veteran families are in need of true man or woman power.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

A big thanks to all the other organization we have collaborated with. Which include but are not limited to: Will County Center for Community Concerns, Joliet Township, Volunteers of America, Will County Senior Services, Joliet Township Disability Resource Center, Illinois Department of Employment Services, Will County Workforce Development Center, Farm2Veteran, Will County Habitat for Humanity, United Way of Will County Continuum of Care, Catholic Charities, Red Cross, Illinois Joining Home Forces, Home Depot Foundation, Sam's Club, Orland Township, Naperville Responds for Veterans, Romeoville Police Department, Joliet Police Department, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Prince Home, Illinois Armed Forces Legal Network, Operation Veteran Success, Old National Bank, Sharing Connections, Will County Land Use and Prairie State Legal Services

"We cannot express our gratitude enough for all of those who assisted in making this a successful year. We will continue to provide excellence at the highest possible standards to support the veterans in our community"



REFERENCES

1. Veteran Population https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp
2. VA Geographical Distribution of Expenditures <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/expenditures.asp>
3. VA Compensation by County Report (Data Catalog, Search by County) <https://data.va.gov/>
4. VA Monday Morning Workload https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/detailed_claims_data.asp
5. Veterans Benefits Administration Annual Report <https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/>
6. Board of Veterans Appeals Statistics <https://www.bva.va.gov/bva/decision-wait-times.asp>
7. Board of Veterans Appeals Annual Report https://www.bva.va.gov/Chairman_Annual_Rpts.asp
8. Illinois Department of Employment Security Monthly Veterans Report <https://ides.illinois.gov/resources/labor-market-information/veterans.html>
9. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Point-in-Time Count: <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports/>
10. U.S. Census Bureau statistics <https://www.census.gov/data.html>
11. Disabled Veteran Property Tax <https://tax.illinois.gov/research/taxstats/propertytaxstatistics.html>
12. Veteran Support Center Coming To Former Silver Cross Campus in Joliet <https://patch.com/illinois/joliet/will-county-veteran-assistance-support-center-joliet>
13. <https://vetpro.us/why-vetpro/>

CONTACT INFORMATION

2400 Glenwood Ave Suite 110

Joliet, Illinois 60435

Phone (815) 7740-8389 Fax (815) 740-4329