



VETERANS ASSISTANCE
— COMMISSION —
OF WILL COUNTY

Annual Report

Fiscal Year 2025

December, 2025

Dear Governor Pritzker,

It is my pleasure to present the Annual Report of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Will County (VACWC), pursuant to Chapter 330, Part 45, Section 8 of the Illinois Compiled Statutes.

With more than 25,800 veterans, Will County has the third-largest veteran population in Illinois. The VACWC proudly delivers essential services in the following core areas:

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

In Fiscal Year 2025, the VACWC directly assisted more than 4,000 veterans, dependents, and survivors in securing the benefits they earned through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs—returning more than \$2.62 million in recurring federal dollars to Will County households every month.

This year, we significantly expanded our mental health program to address a growing need for timely, specialized emotional and behavioral health support. These investments strengthen our ability to address the invisible wounds of military service through culturally competent counseling, crisis stabilization, peer-based recovery support, therapeutic groups, and coordinated intervention.

To better serve the veteran community and support expanding programs, the VACWC will relocate to the Copperfield building in early 2026. The new space—located adjacent to the Joliet VA CBOC and Hope Manor Veteran Housing—will increase capacity, improve accessibility, and centralize multiple veteran service partners into a single hub of coordinated care.

We remain proud partners of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA), with an IDVA service officer embedded in our office to ensure seamless access to state-level benefits and case coordination.

The VACWC continues to lead veteran advocacy efforts in Illinois. Our strong partnerships with community agencies, healthcare leaders, and the VA enable us to address the unique needs of Will County veterans and families with precision, compassion, and measurable outcomes.

Very respectfully,

Jennifer Solum
Superintendent

2025 Commission Members

1. President	Larry Shaver	AL 1288 Bolingbrook
2. Vice President	Mark Razny	AL 1977 New Lenox
3. Sgt-at-Arms	Mike White	AL 241 Joliet
4. Judge Advocate	Lisa McGlasson	AL 935 Manhattan
5. Chaplain	Jim Clausen	VFW 367 Joliet
6. Secretary	Heather Falkenthal	Appointed
7. Delegate/Alternate	Rick Todd/Raj Pillai	AL 13 Plainfield
8. Delegate/Alternate	Mike Meyers/Frank DiGiovanni	AL 18 Lockport
9. Delegate/Alternate	Luke Opyd/Tom Jorstadt	AL 43 Naperville
10. Delegate/Alternate	Steve Daley/Virgil Oikion	AL 52 Romeoville
11. Delegate/Alternate	Frank Mlyniec/Thomas Stec	AL 191 Wilmington
12. Delegate	Mike White	AL 214 Joliet
13. Delegate/Alternate	Jim Clausen/Dennis Havranek	VFW 367 Joliet
14. Delegate/Alternate	Bob Krueger/Rick Bolanowski	AL 392 Peotone
15. Delegate/Alternate	Paul Cravens/James Hogan	VFW 725 Mokena
16. Delegate/Alternate	Robert Angone/Lisa McGlasson	AL 935 Manhattan
17. Delegate	Tony Arellano	AL 1080 Joliet
18. Delegate/Alternate	Larry Shaver/Wayne Macejak	AL 1288 Bolingbrook
19. Delegate/Alternate	Rik Onate/Larry Black	AL 1291 Crete
20. Delegate/Alternate	Mark Razny/Patrick McLeod	AL 1977 New Lenox
21. Delegate/Alternate	Lawrence Smith/Kevin Pomykala	VFW 2199
22. Delegate/Alternate	Walter Wink/Ken Piehl	VFW 5422 Wilmington
23. Delegate/Alternate	Mark Bowman/Dale Jacobs	VFW 5788 Lockport
24. Delegate/Alternate	Ken Griffin/James Andrulowicz	VFW 5819 Lemont
25. Delegate/Alternate	John Davin/Greg Palmer	VFW 5917 Bolingbrook
26. Delegate	Clarke Christiansen	VFW 9545 New Lenox
27. County Exec Appt	Sherwanda Beck-Atkinson	Appointed



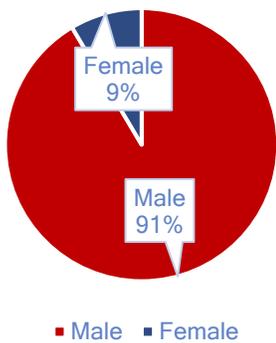
(Not pictured: Erik Papineau, Kristian Aquino, Will Sutton, Ponce Vargas)

VACWC MISSION

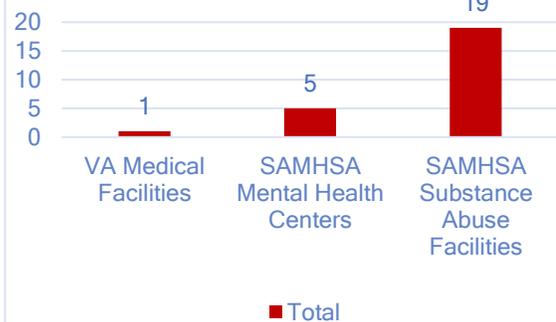
"The Veterans Assistance Commission of Will County's mission is to protect, promote, and provide services to Veterans as honorably and selflessly as they had done for us in the past."

Will County Demographics

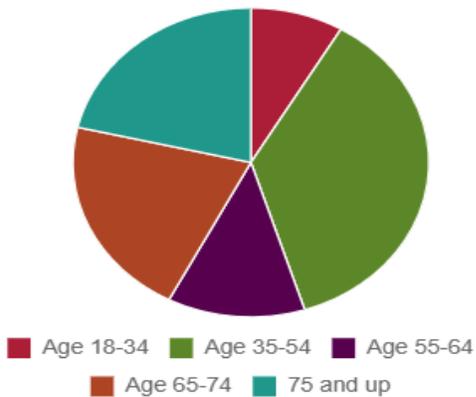
Veteran Population 25,800



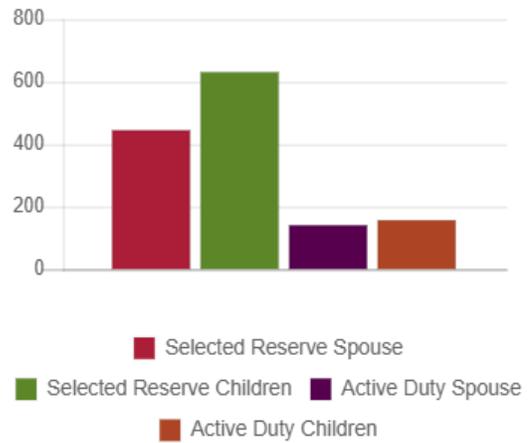
Number of Treatment Facilities



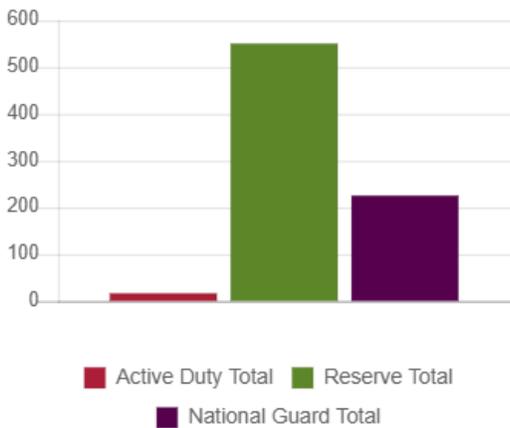
Veterans by Age Group



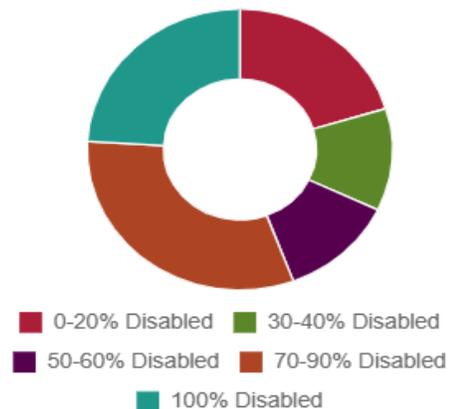
Selected Reserve & Active Duty Dependents

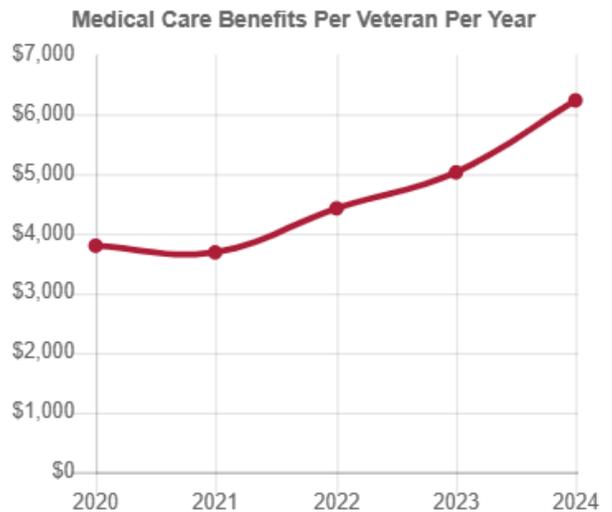
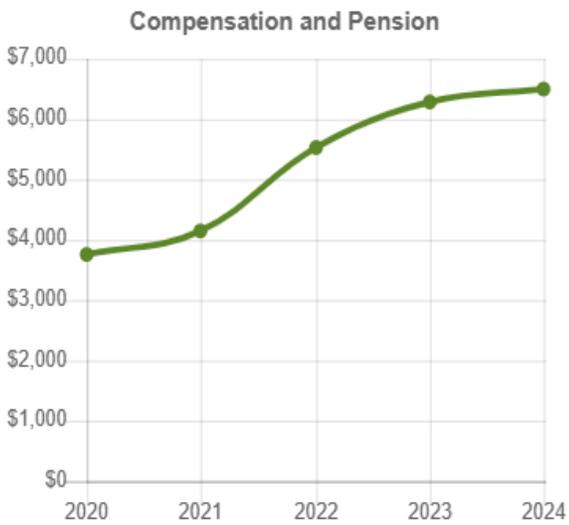
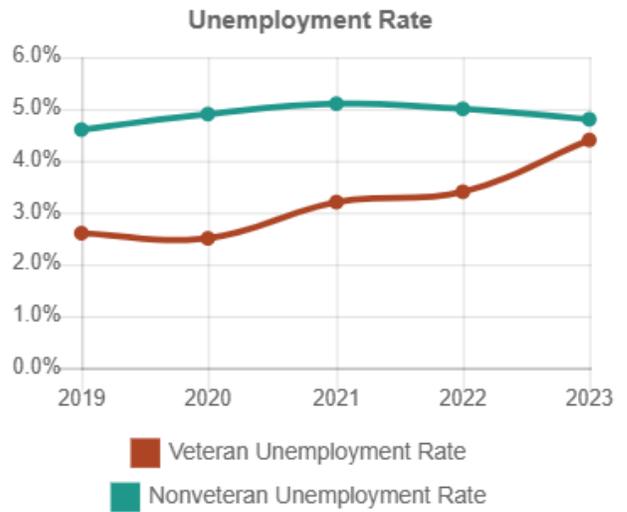
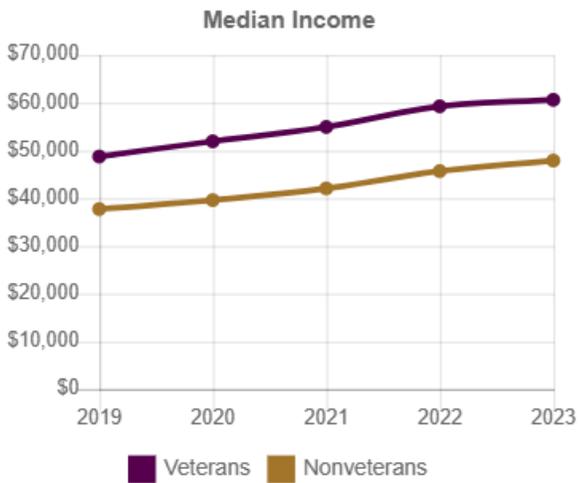


Service Member Population

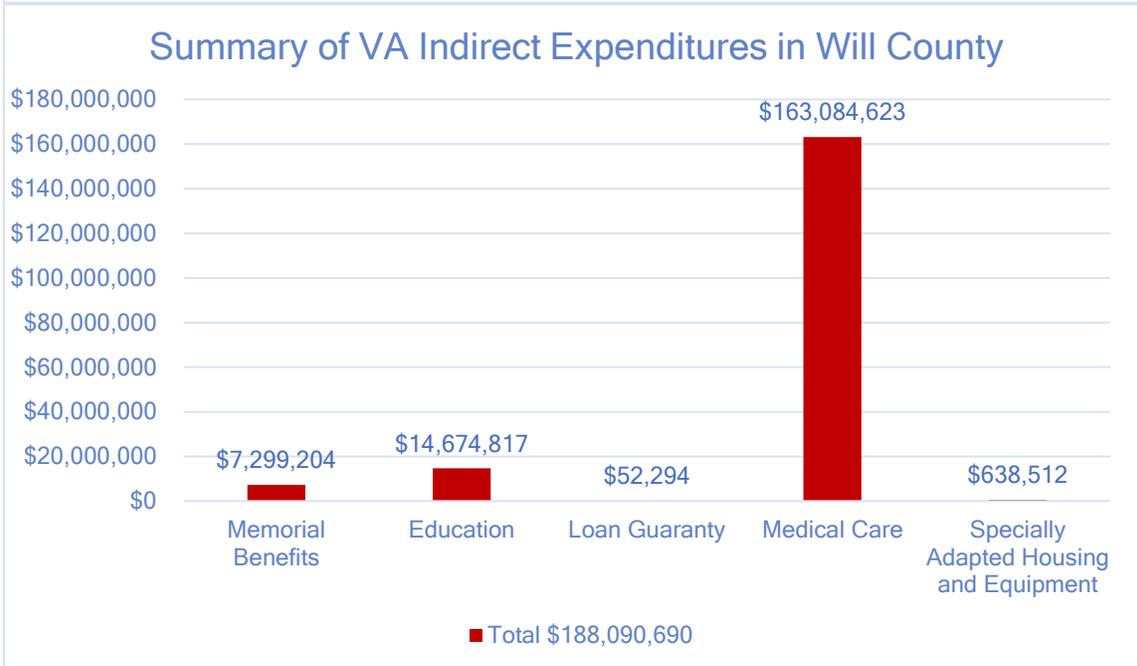
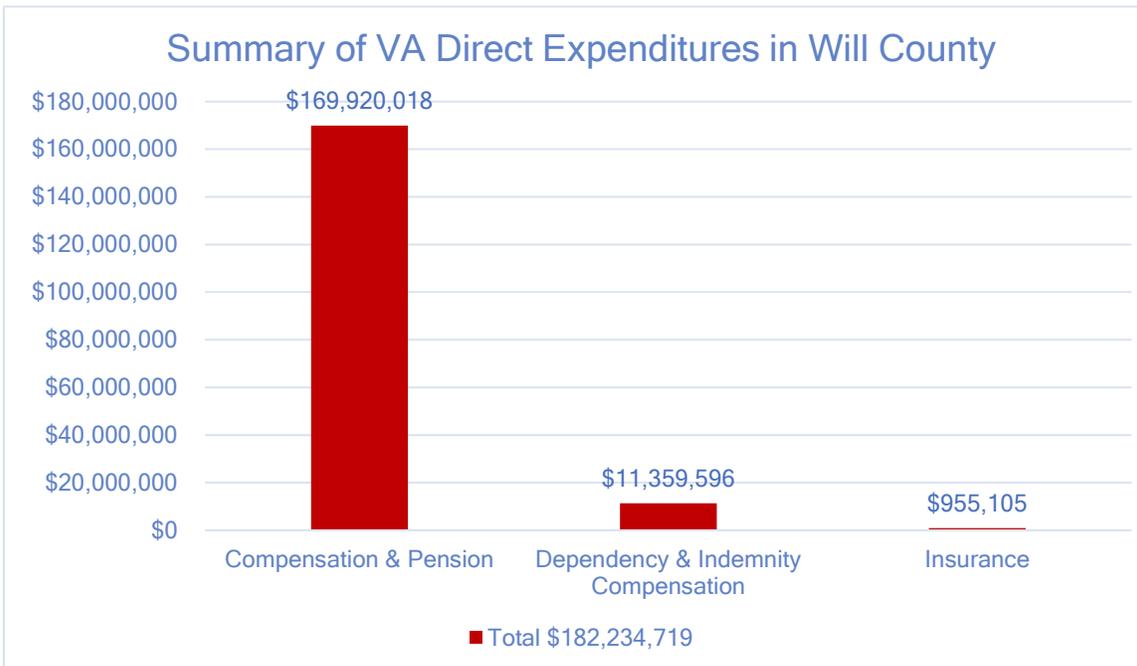


Veteran Disability Ratings





These snapshots provide a high-level picture of the military-connected population within Will County. Demographic data from Measuring Communities allows us to plan resources strategically, anticipate program needs, and ensure that outreach, transportation, mental health, and stabilization services are responsive to the veteran population we serve.



- **Compensation and Pension:** VA disability compensation and disability pension payments for eligible veterans.
- **Dependency & Indemnity Compensation and Survivors Pension:** Tax-free monetary benefits to surviving spouses and dependents.
- **Insurance:** VA expenditures for death claims, disability income provisions, endowments, and related benefits.
- **Memorial Benefits:** VA expenditures for burial, interment, plaques, headstones, medallions, and related administrative costs.
- **Education and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment:** Combined VA expenditures for GI Bill education, job training, apprenticeships, and rehabilitation services.
- **Loan Guaranty:** VA expenditures for guaranteed home loans, direct loans to qualifying disabled veterans, and Native American Veteran loan programs.
- **Medical Expenditures:** VA expenditures related to clinical care, treatment, and support services.

Advocacy and Benefits Representation

Advocacy and Benefits Representation

Per the Military and Veterans Assistance Act (330 ILCS 45/9 Sec. 9(a)(1)), the Veterans Assistance Commission (VAC) is mandated to represent veterans in their applications for, or attempts to obtain, benefits and services through State and Federal agencies, including representation during appeals of adverse decisions. This statutory responsibility forms the foundation of our mission: to ensure that every veteran, dependent, and survivor receives the benefits they have earned through military service.

The Role and Value of Veteran Service Officers

Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) are accredited professionals who guide veterans through disability claims, pensions, healthcare enrollment, survivor benefits, educational programs, and other federal and state programs. VSOs ensure:

- Claims are accurately completed and documented
- Appropriate evidence and records are gathered
- Appeals are professionally represented
- Veterans receive the full benefits for which they qualify

Without accredited representation, many veterans face claim denials, delays, or under-awards due to the complexity of VA processes.

Impact of Veteran Service Officers

In FY2025, VACWC VSOs submitted more than 6,576 forms, including over 1,700 formal benefit applications to the VA.

This advocacy resulted in:

- **\$8,791,600 in retroactive VA payments**
- **\$2,621,293 in recurring monthly VA benefits** returned to Will County veterans

These dollars flow directly into veteran households, stabilizing families, increasing healthcare access, improving long-term financial security, and driving local economic activity.

The Strategic Value of Investing in VACWC Services

The more capacity the VACWC has to serve veterans, the more federal benefit dollars flow into the county. Investment in VSO staffing, outreach, technology, and case management produces measurable results:

- Higher claim volume
- Higher award rates
- Faster processing and fewer denials
- Better representation in appeals
- Greater access to pension, healthcare, caregiver, and survivor programs

As the VACWC expands service coverage—especially into underserved or rural areas—more veterans are reached, more claims are completed accurately, and more federal dollars are awarded.



Jen Solum
Superintendent



Amy Benson
Assistant Superintendent
VSO, CVA



Erik Papineau
VSO, CVA



Brandon Peterson
VSO



Jeff Walsh
VSO



Rosemarie Bitar
VSO

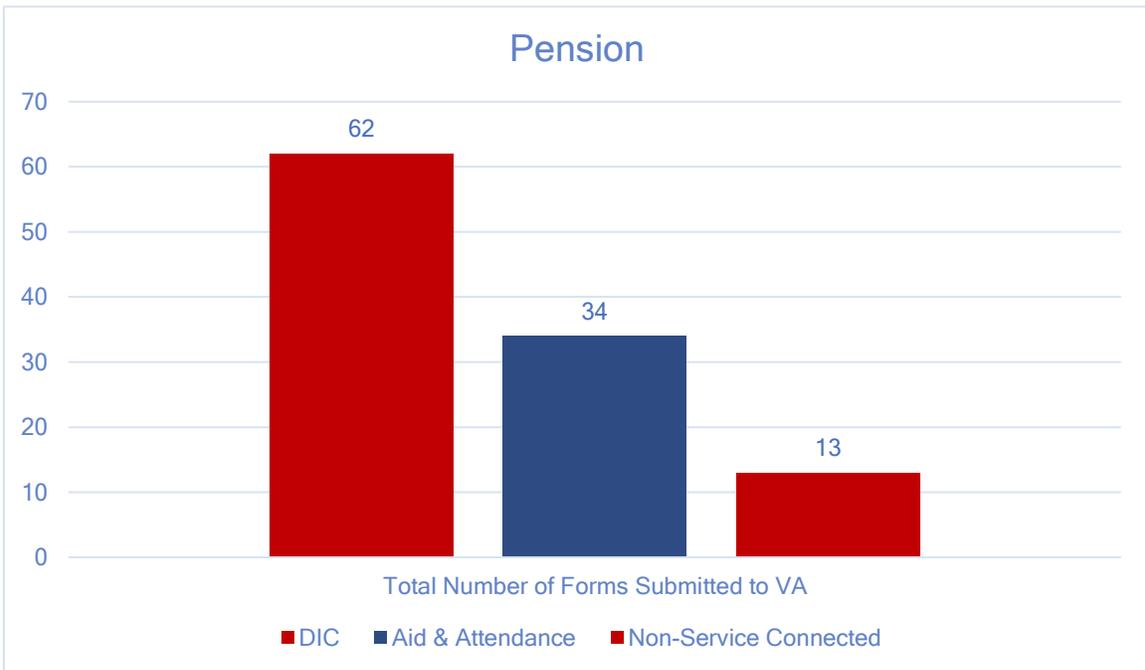
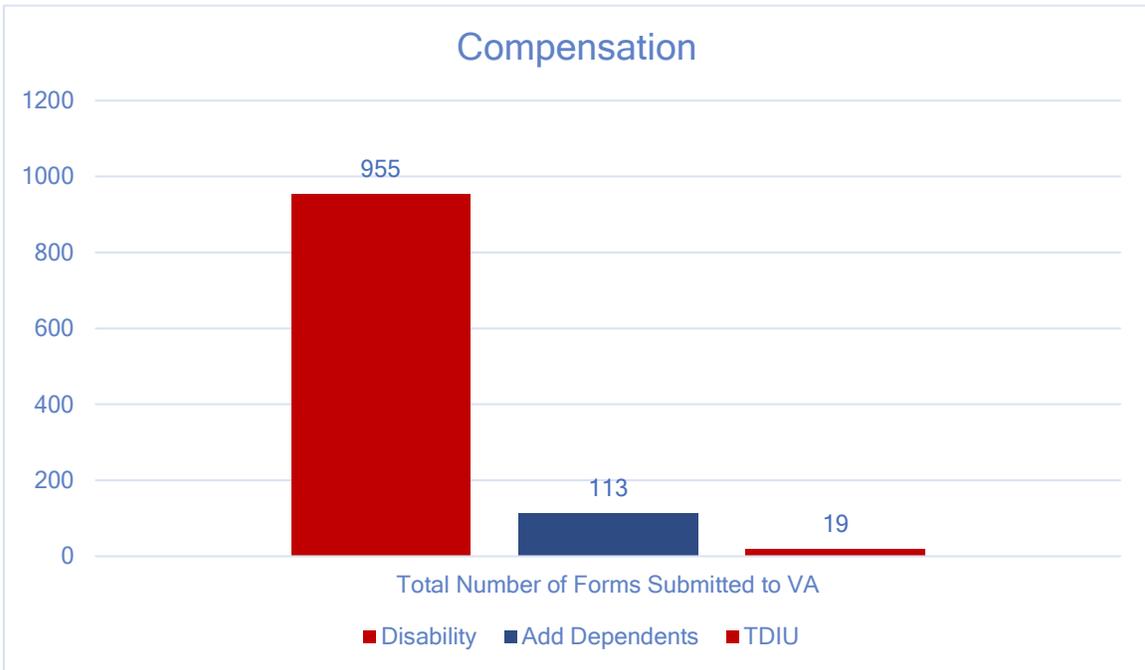


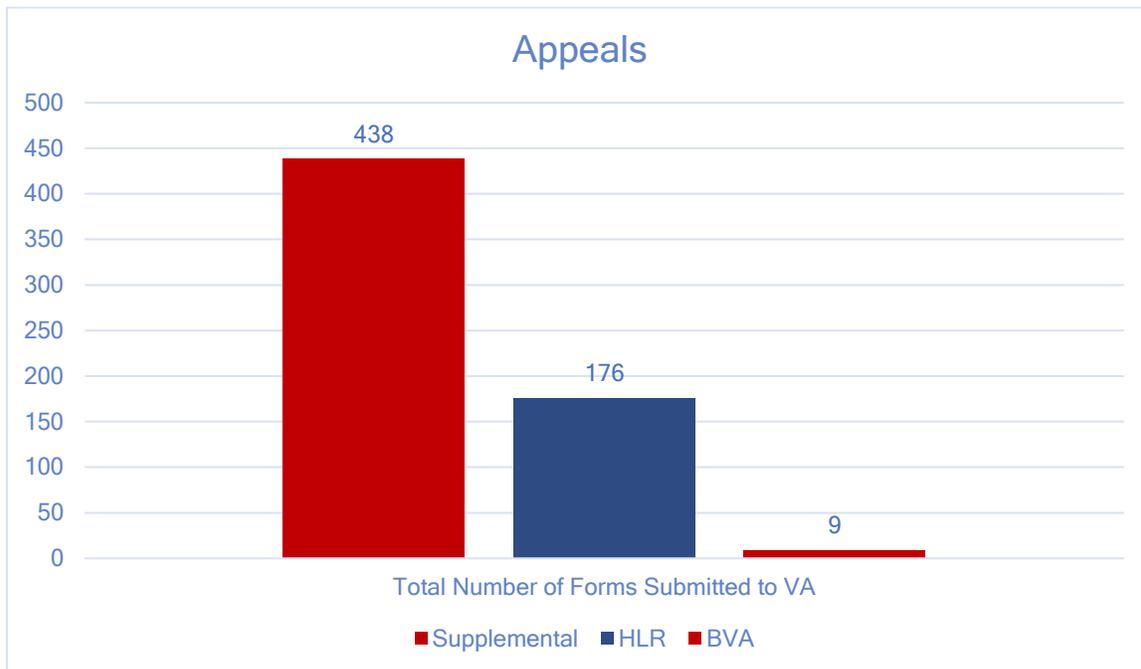
Kristian Aquino
VSO



William Sutton
VSO

Total Number of Forms Submitted to VA





Service-connected disability: If a medical or mental health condition that was caused by, worsened by, or directly related to a veteran’s military service and qualifies the veteran for VA disability compensation benefits.

Dependents: You can add dependents to your VA disability compensation if you have a combined rating of 30% or higher, which can increase your monthly payment.

Total Disability based on Individual Unemployability (TDIU): VA benefit that pays veterans at the 100% disability rate if their service-connected conditions prevent them from maintaining substantially gainful employment even if their combined disability rating isn't 100%.

Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC): Tax-free monetary benefit from the VA for eligible survivors of military personnel who died in the line of duty or veterans whose death resulted from a service-connected condition.

Aid and Attendance (A&A): Benefit is an addition to the VA Pension for wartime veterans or surviving spouses who need help with daily activities or live in a nursing home. It provides extra funds for long-term care, requiring medical proof and meeting strict income/net worth limits

Non-Service Connected Pension: Tax-free monthly payment for wartime veterans (and sometimes their survivors) who have limited income and assets, and meet age (65+) or disability criteria, but whose medical conditions aren't directly

Supplemental Claim: A formal way for Veterans to ask the VA to review a previously denied or partially granted disability claim by submitting new and relevant evidence, aiming for a more favorable decision linked to their military service.

Higher-Level Review (HLR): A fast-track option for veterans to request a senior reviewer look at a denied or partially granted disability claim to find clear errors or differences in opinion, without submitting new evidence, preserving the original effective date.

Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA): A division of the Department of Veterans Affairs that reviews and makes final decisions on appeals for denied VA benefits, allowing veterans to challenge unfavorable rulings from regional offices through direct review, evidence submission, or hearings with Veterans Law Judges.

Productivity And Interactions

From open to close, the VACWC office remains consistently active, serving veterans through walk-in consultations, case management, mental health support, and food pantry access. Behind the scenes, phone, email, and referral volume confirms sustained reliance on our office as a primary support hub. At the heart of this operation is Anna Lukasevich, Administrative Assistant, who skillfully multitasks and keeps information and communication flowing seamlessly. Her organization and responsiveness ensure that both veterans and staff receive the support and coordination they need to navigate services effectively and efficiently.

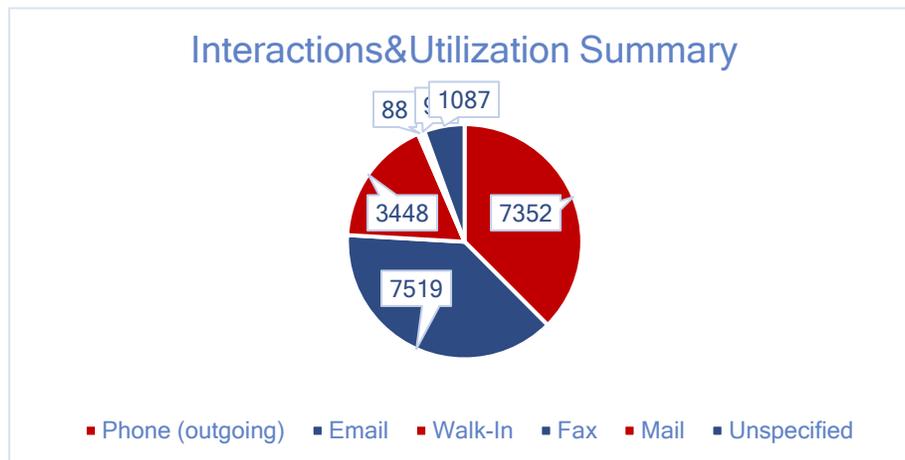


Anna
Lukasevich
Administrative
Assistant

In FY2025:

- **Incoming calls:** 14,020
- **Outgoing calls:** 7,352
- **Emails sent:** 7,519
- **Walk-ins:** 3,448

These numbers represent real people and real needs, confirming that utilization is high and the VACWC remains central to veteran stabilization and resource access.



Mental Health Program

Purpose of the Mental Health Program at the VACWC

The Mental Health Program ensures culturally informed, timely clinical support for veterans navigating behavioral health challenges, crisis needs, PTSD, anxiety, depression, trauma, or reintegration barriers. A core function is bridging gaps between VA mental health access and community providers, ensuring continuity regardless of eligibility or service limitations.

Team



Sam Lucko, LCPC, serves as the Mental Health Coordinator, providing access to counseling, support services, and playing a critical role in bridging individuals to appropriate care.



Joe Martin, Peer Support Recovery Specialist, facilitates recovery meetings and offers peer-to-peer support. His lived experience and empathetic approach make him an invaluable asset to the program, helping build trust and sustained engagement in recovery.

Clinical Support

52 veterans engaged in clinical care, crisis support, or case facilitation:

- 30 successfully connected with long-term care
- 3 crisis episodes stabilized successfully without escalation
- 2 pending services due to eligibility or scheduling
- 17 supported while incarcerated at the Will County Adult Detention Facility

Judicial Collaboration — Veterans Treatment Court

Weekly court presence ensures early intervention, improved compliance, expedited access to VA benefits, and enhanced reintegration planning.

Support for Incarcerated Veterans

30 veterans received structured support including:

- Benefits navigation
- Clinical referrals
- Legal documentation retrieval
- Reintegration planning

Grant Funding

\$100,500 in total grant support expanded:

- Outreach vehicle acquisition
- Holistic and trauma-informed wellness services
- Recreational wellness
- Gas and grocery assistance for stabilization

Peer Support Recovery Programs

Peer programming supported:

- 118 veterans in recovery or stabilization through the “Together We Stand” group
- 48 homeless veterans with housing access in conjunction with the VA Homeless Prevention team
- 138 veterans in the Veterans Problem Solving Court Program with therapeutic support
- 19 veterans in “Recovery on the River Walk” group

Regional Collaboration — Veteran Crisis Response Task Force

On September 12, 2025, five Veteran Assistance Commissions convened to address rising rural veteran mental health needs. The task force identified shared service gaps, cross-agency solutions, and opportunities for collaborative crisis intervention. Bi-monthly meetings will continue, with the next scheduled for January 14, 2026. This developing network advances coordinated advocacy, shared response models, and systemic improvements for veterans across rural communities.

Program Outcome and Growth

2025 demonstrated strong crisis stabilization, expanded referrals, successful reintegration planning, minimal escalations, and strong transitions into long-term treatment. A key goal for 2026 is to restructure the current Mental Health Coordinator role into three distinct positions: Program Coordinator, Counselor, and VSO Case Manager. This restructuring reflects a commitment to sustainable program growth, service excellence, and improved outcomes for vulnerable veteran populations through intentional planning and resource allocation.

Financial Assistance Program Summary

In FY2025, the VACWC provided \$26,811.54 in direct housing and utility stabilization for eligible veteran households.

This assistance:

- Includes 74 veterans and/or their dependents
- Prevented eviction or homelessness
- Stopped utility shutoffs
- Reduced economic distress and downstream cost

This total does not include emergency aid, which has significantly increased due to short-term financial crises, sudden unemployment, increased cost of living, and medical needs.

Within the financial assistance program, we have observed an increased need for support with past due property taxes and mortgage payments—critical issues that directly impact housing stability. As a result of increasing property taxes, more individuals are struggling to remain in their homes. This issue disproportionately affects our seniors, who are often on fixed incomes and lack the financial flexibility to absorb rising housing costs. However, current restrictions on the use of county taxpayer dollars prevent us from addressing these specific needs, leaving a gap in assistance for some of the most vulnerable community members.

While there are grants available to help fill this gap, they are not consistently offered or funded, making it difficult to rely on them as a sustainable solution. Furthermore, most grant programs typically do not allow funds to be used for mortgage payments—only for rent—because a mortgage is viewed as an asset. This limitation further complicates efforts to assist homeowners at risk of foreclosure due to financial hardship. This growing trend underscores the need for stable, alternative funding sources or partnerships to address housing-related financial crises more effectively.

Economic Drivers

- Rising housing costs
- Increased medical needs
- Higher transportation costs
- Veteran unemployment rising to 4.9% in 2024 (up from 3.0% in 2023)

(Illinois Department of Employment Security, 2025)

Recommendation for FY2026

In response to the growing number of individuals—particularly seniors and veterans—struggling with rising housing costs, including property tax delinquency and past-due mortgage payments, we recommend a strategic expansion of eligibility criteria and emergency response flexibility within the financial assistance program. These enhancements would support earlier interventions and more inclusive access to housing stabilization resources.

Key goals of this recommendation include:

- **Increase Early Stabilization**

By expanding income eligibility thresholds and allowing for more proactive interventions, the program can engage households before they reach a point of housing crisis. This includes addressing property tax arrears and mortgage delinquency, which are currently excluded due to funding limitations and eligibility restrictions.

- **Reduce Risk of Homelessness**

Many homeowners—particularly older adults on fixed incomes—are at imminent risk of displacement due to unpaid property taxes or mortgage payments. The inability to assist with these expenses disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. Incorporating these needs into assistance planning would help prevent avoidable housing loss.

- **Align Income Thresholds to Current Economic Conditions**

Economic realities, including inflation and local housing cost increases, have rendered current eligibility caps outdated. Adjusting thresholds to reflect cost-of-living increases will allow for more accurate targeting of those truly in need.

- **Support Veterans Temporarily Above Standard Caps but in Crisis**

Veterans facing acute crises—such as legal involvement, medical hardship, or job loss—may temporarily exceed income caps but still require emergency support. Granting case-by-case flexibility would ensure no veteran in need is turned away based solely on technical ineligibility.

- **Pursue Resources Specifically for Property Tax and Mortgage Assistance**

Current county and most grant funds exclude mortgage and property tax payments, as mortgages are considered assets. However, the need for specialized funding streams or advocacy for more flexible funding is critical. FY2026 should include a targeted effort to identify or create funding partnerships (e.g., with housing trust funds, philanthropic organizations, or state-level hardship programs) that can directly assist with:

- Delinquent property taxes
- Impending mortgage foreclosure
- One-time payments to retain homeownership and prevent shelter entry

Transportation Program

Veterans Transportation Program

In FY2025, the VACWC operated a transportation program staffed by two part-time professional drivers, providing 325 rides to medical appointments for veterans throughout Will County. Collectively, our drivers logged 20,231 miles transporting veterans to VA clinics, specialty care providers, hospitals, and other medically necessary destinations.

This represents a 62% increase in rides from 2024, when 200 rides were provided, reflecting both higher service demand and the growing importance of safe, reliable, no-cost transportation for medical care.

Our transportation program prioritizes veterans who lack access to a personal vehicle, cannot safely drive due to medical conditions, or do not have family or community support to assist with transportation. The service is provided at no cost to eligible veterans and directly helps ensure continuity of care, timely treatment, and reduced risk of missed appointments.

Program Growth and Changing Conditions

The sharp increase in rides was driven in part by recent changes at the VA making transportation eligibility more restrictive. As a result, more veterans who previously relied on VA transportation services are now turning to the VACWC for support.

Impact

The transportation program ensures veterans can:

- Attend medical appointments on time
- Maintain continuity of care and follow-up treatment
- Access routine care, specialty services, surgical procedures, dental and lab appointments
- Avoid missed appointments due to lack of transportation
- Improve health outcomes and reduce preventable emergency care needs



James Richards
Transportation
Officer



Ponce Vargas
Transportation
Officer

Outreach

Veterans Outreach Program

In Fiscal Year 2025, the VACWC strengthened its community outreach program by assigning a designated VSO, Jeff Walsh, to recurring and single-event outreach efforts across Will County. This dedicated outreach structure allows us to meet veterans where they are—at community centers, senior facilities, partner agencies, resource fairs, VFW/AL posts, and county events—to provide direct support, increase awareness of earned benefits, and reduce barriers to accessing federal and local resources.

Throughout the year, the VACWC hosted or participated in 91 outreach events, during which 253 veterans, dependents, and survivors received in-person benefits assistance, case support, or program enrollment. These field-based contacts significantly expanded access for individuals who might otherwise delay or forgo needed benefit applications due to transportation limitations, mobility issues, lack of information, or unfamiliarity with the claims process.

VSO Jeff Walsh meets veterans, spouses, caregivers, and survivors outside of traditional office settings to assist with disability compensation claims, pensions, healthcare access, survivor benefits, and local resource referrals. His work ensures that individuals do not need to navigate complex federal systems alone.

Program Design and Community Access

The VACWC maintains a structured outreach model that includes:

- Recurring community visits and office hours embedded with partner organizations
- Event-based outreach at health fairs, veteran service organizations, and county events
- On-site benefits assistance, providing claim preparation, enrollment, appeals guidance, and referrals in real time

This approach ensures that veterans and their families receive direct access to accredited claims support without the need for a formal office appointment.

Impact and Client Success

A powerful example of outreach effectiveness occurred this year when VSO Jeff Walsh met with a surviving spouse during one of our community outreach visits. She had previously been denied federal survivor benefits and believed she had exhausted all options. Jeff reviewed her case, gathered supporting evidence, and re-filed the claim.

As a result, the claim was approved with more than \$300,000 in retroactive VA benefits, providing substantial financial relief and long-term stability for the widow. This outcome illustrates the essential role of outreach-based advocacy: many veterans and survivors do not pursue important benefits or appeals without trusted, knowledgeable support.

By bringing accredited VSO services directly into the community, the program removes barriers, improves benefit access, and delivers measurable financial impact for veterans and their families.



County Board Presentation



Special Olympics Truck Pull



Outreach

VetFest 2025

VetFest 2025, hosted by JPD Battle Buddies and the VACWC, is held annually to promote veteran suicide prevention awareness and connect veterans with local support and resources. The event brought together community partners, service organizations, and veteran families for a day of outreach, connection, and advocacy.

This year's VetFest was especially memorable, as we had two WWII veterans as guests of honor. Ted Micci and Joe Belman's presence reminded all in attendance of the legacy and sacrifice of our nation's heroes. In a touching tribute, VSO Will Sutton arranged a surprise flyover of a restored 1944 T6 Texan aircraft, which captivated the crowd and added a powerful moment of reflection and celebration to the day's events.

VetFest successfully raised over \$8,000 for the Farm 2 Veteran program, helping expand food security and wellness support for veterans and their families. Farm 2 Veteran keeps the VACWC stocked with fresh produce and meat for local veterans, ensuring access to healthy food and nutritional support throughout the year.

The event strengthened community engagement, increased awareness of available services, and demonstrated our shared commitment to improving veteran health, stability, and quality of life in Will County.



Teamwork

Community Support



Farm 2 Vet Donation

Charli

Charli, the VACWC’s beloved emotional support canine, continues to play a vital role in creating a welcoming, calming environment for veterans, widows, and all who visit the office. Her presence provides immediate emotional relief, comfort, and connections, especially for those navigating grief, trauma, or mental health challenges.

Despite her large size and drooly affection, Charli has won the hearts of everyone she meets. She carries herself with gentle confidence and, amusingly, seems to think she’s the size of a house cat—often attempting to curl up in laps or squeeze into tight spaces to be near visitors. Her unconditional acceptance and friendly demeanor makes her an indispensable member of the team.

Charli also takes an active role in the community, attending outreach events, veterans’ gatherings, and wellness fairs where her impact is just as powerful. For many, she serves as an icebreaker and source of grounding in emotionally charged or unfamiliar settings. Veterans and widows frequently comment on how much they look forward to seeing her—often asking for her by name.

In a program deeply rooted in healing, trust-building, and emotional resilience, Charli offers something no policy or process can: a consistent, loyal presence that helps people feel safe, seen, and supported. Her value extends beyond the office walls—she is truly a canine ambassador of care and connection.



Outreach



County Fair



Cpt Solum



Lisa McGlasson
VACWC Judge Advocate

VACWC Goals 2026

Looking ahead to 2026, the VACWC will focus on:

- **Expanding financial assistance eligibility** to better support veteran households facing temporary hardship, income disruption, housing instability, or unexpected medical or caregiving expenses.
- **Enhancing outreach capacity**, including expanded event coverage, increased office hours at partner locations, and more rural or underserved community visits.
- **Strengthening transportation resources**, including increased driver hours or vehicle availability to accommodate higher ride volume and ensure consistent access to medical care.
- **Increasing VSO staffing or support capacity**, ensuring timely claim preparation, appeals representation, survivor benefits assistance, and case management for an expanding veteran population.
- **Improving data collection and performance tracking** to quantify program impact, measure federal benefit dollars returned to the community, and support data-driven planning, budgeting, and grant applications.
- **Deepening partnerships with local agencies, municipalities, nonprofits, and veteran organizations**, expanding access points, coordinated referrals, and wraparound support for veterans and their families.
- **Transitioning operations to the Copperfield building in 2026**, providing expanded office space, greater accessibility for walk-in services, and the capacity to manage significantly higher service demand across claims, transportation, outreach, and financial assistance.

The Copperfield relocation is strategically aligned with rising demand, increasing program complexity, and the need for expanded space to meet veterans where they are. Strengthening program capacity in 2026 will ensure the VACWC continues to deliver high-impact, equitable, and accessible services to veterans throughout Will County.



Closing Remarks

As we close out this year's report, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to the many people who make our mission possible.

To our amazing team, thank you for your unwavering dedication, compassion, and commitment to excellence. Your daily work changes lives and builds the foundation for everything we do.

To our community partners and supporters, your continued collaboration and generosity have helped us extend our reach and impact. Your belief in our mission fuels our momentum and strengthens our resolve.

And most of all, to our Commission Members, thank you for your steadfast service and tireless advocacy on behalf of the veterans in your communities. Your leadership, insight, and dedication continue to shape the future of our programs and ensure that no veteran is left behind.

Looking ahead to 2026, we are filled with excitement and optimism as we prepare to open our new building and expand our capacity to serve even more veterans and their families. With your continued support, we are confident that the year ahead will bring even greater impact, innovation, and connection.

With appreciation,

Jen Solum
Superintendent