

News Letter



FEB. 2026

**Veterans Honored at Middle East
Conflict Recognition Ceremony in
Worth, IL**

**VACCC Expands Outreach Through
Partnerships with Cook County
Universities**

Veterans Honored at Middle East Conflict Recognition Ceremony in Worth

February 22, 2026



The VACCC had the privilege of attending a ceremony honoring Veterans who served during the conflicts in the Middle East that was held at the Marris Meyer American Legion Post in Worth, Illinois. The event recognized the service and sacrifice of Veterans who served during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm from 1990 to 1991, as well as those who later served during Operation Enduring Freedom (2001–2014) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2015).

While the Gulf War era is sometimes overshadowed by the two decades of conflict that followed in the region, the ceremony provided an important opportunity to acknowledge the dedication of those who answered

the call to serve during that critical period of history. Alongside the VACCC, several organizations attended the event to honor Veterans and provide support services, including the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the Women Marines Association, Hines VA Hospital, and the Post-9/11 Military to VA Program.

Together, these partners helped ensure that Veterans and their families not only received recognition for their service but also had access to information about the benefits, healthcare, and community resources available to them. The ceremony served as both a tribute and a reminder of the lasting commitment to support those who have served our nation.



Superintendent's Corner



Elizabeth D. Soto
Superintendent

Serving Those Who Served

As we continue through the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2026, the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County remains steadfast in our mission: to serve, support, and advocate for the Veterans and families of Cook County.

February was another month that demonstrated the resilience of our Veteran community and the dedication of our staff and partners who work tirelessly to ensure that no Veteran stands alone during times of need.

Through compassionate service, responsible stewardship of public funds, and a deep commitment to the men and women who served our nation, the VACCC continues to deliver meaningful support across housing stability, essential living needs, transportation access, and end of life honors.

Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County (VACCC)

Superintendent's Monthly Update
February 2026 | FY26 – First Quarter

February 2026 Financial Assistance Overview During the month of February 2026, the VACCC provided a total of:

\$96,196.28 in Direct Emergency Financial Assistance

This funding directly supported Cook County Veterans and their families in maintaining stability and access to critical resources.

Housing Stability

In February, the VACCC invested heavily in preventing displacement and ensuring Veterans remain safely housed.

Rent Assistance: \$20,612.35
Mortgage Assistance: \$7,753.92

Total Housing Support: \$28,366.27
These funds helped Veterans remain in their homes and provided critical relief during periods of financial strain.



Superintendent's Corner

Essential Utility Support

Rising utility costs continue to impact households across Cook County. The VACCC stepped up to provide assistance with help for Veterans to maintain access to essential household services.

- **Electric: \$8,170.32**
- **Gas: \$7,018.74**
- **Water: \$1,451.10**
- **Total Utility Assistance: \$16,640.16**

Basic Living Necessities

Supporting Veterans' daily well-being is essential to maintaining stability and quality of life.

- **Food Assistance Cards: \$18,900.00**
- **Personal Hygiene Support: \$11,200.00**
- **Total Essential Needs Assistance: \$30,100.00**

These programs ensured our Cook County Veterans had access to food and essential hygiene products

Transportation Access

Reliable transportation is often the bridge between Veterans and critical services.

VACCC provided **\$2,322.50 in transportation assistance**, primarily through CTA transit cards, allowing veterans to attend:

- **Medical appointments**
- **Employment opportunities**
- **Benefits appointments**
- **VACCC services and outreach programs**



Superintendent's Corner

Honoring Our Veterans

VACCC remained committed to honoring Veterans and supporting their families during times of loss. In February, the Commission provided:

- **\$17,995.00 in burial and memorial assistance**

Additional Support Services

Additional assistance was also provided to help Veterans maintain connectivity and mobility:

- **Internet Assistance: \$273.35**
- **Telephone Assistance: \$399.00**

Gas Cards: \$100.00

These resources assisted Veterans remain connected to healthcare, employment, and community support systems.

February Service Metrics

Beyond financial assistance, the VACCC continued to provide extensive direct engagement and case management services.

During February:

- **316 Veterans visited VACCC offices**
- **631 calls were handled by staff**
- **41 outreach events were conducted**
- **58 new veterans were onboarded into VACCC services**

These numbers reflect the growing demand for services and the strong outreach presence VACCC maintains throughout Cook County.



Superintendent's Corner

Looking Ahead to a Strong Start to FY26

As we move forward in FY26, the VACCC remains focused on:

- Expanding access to benefits and services
- Strengthening outreach across Cook County communities
- Supporting Cook County Veterans facing financial hardship
- Continuing responsible stewardship of taxpayer resources
- Ensuring every Veteran receives the respect and assistance they deserve

A Message to Our Veterans to the Cook County Veterans and families we serve:

Your strength, sacrifice, and commitment to this nation inspire everything we do.

As we continue into 2026, please know that the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County stands ready to support you! Whether through financial assistance, benefits guidance, outreach programs, or simply a helping hand when it is needed most.

Together, we will continue building a stronger, more supportive community for all who have served.

Veteran Financial Disbursements	
Burial	17,995.00
Rent	20,612.35
Food Cards	18,900.00
Mortgage	7,753.92
Electric	8,170.32
Hygiene	11,200.00
Gas	7,018.74
CTA 7-Day	1,558.00
Water	1,451.10
CTA Single Ride	764.50
Internet	273.35
Telephone	399.00
Gas Cards	100.00
Total Disbursements	96,196.28

With gratitude and respect,

Elizabeth D. Goto

Superintendent
Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County

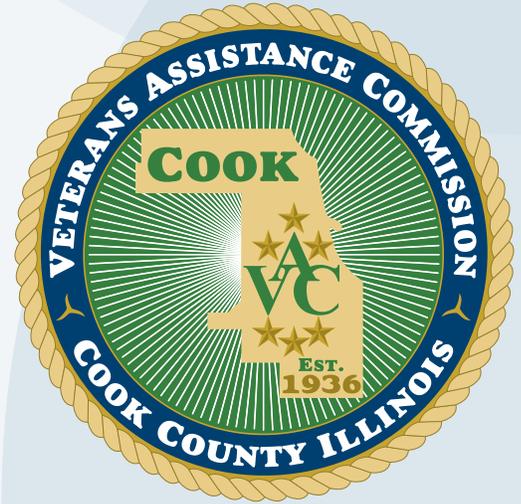


Message from our Executive Board

February 2026



Dutch Degroot
2nd Vice President



Our membership window for becoming a member of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County (VACCC) has now closed. Membership currently stands at 50 organizations, including one pending state charter approval. Many of these organizations are new to our VACCC family, and we warmly welcome you. With membership comes responsibility. Three of the most important responsibilities are:

- Having a delegate attend each VACCC meeting in person.
- Becoming familiar with the Illinois Military & Veterans Assistance Act (MVAA).
- Completing certification under the Illinois Open Meetings Act.

Serving as a VACCC delegate or alternate is comparable to being an elected official serving on a government board or council, and carries similar accountability and expectations.

At our March meeting, we will be holding nominations and elections for all VACCC Board positions. Nominations and elections will occur at the same meeting. Several proposed nominees have already posted their bios and resumes in advance for member review.

I recently returned from Springfield with our Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent, and other members after meeting with our legislative partners. We discussed many bills, but two are top priorities:

SB3646 strengthens the Military & Veterans Assistance Act. It would provide increased oversight responsibilities for member organizations while helping address the issue of counties not paying their fair share of VAC funding. It also makes it possible for counties in Southern Illinois to establish functioning VACs to better serve sparsely populated regions.

HB4891 and SB3352 would help the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs hire more accredited Veterans Service Officers (VSOs). While there is friendly competition among organizations, this effort shows that we all share the same goal—doing what is best for Illinois' veteran community.

Our next meeting will be held on March 24 at the Hines VA Auditorium. Doors will open at 1615, allowing Veterans to engage with a variety of vendors sharing resources and information. The official quarterly meeting will begin at 1900 and conclude at 2030.

Please encourage all veterans to attend the Resource Fair and to stay for the VACCC meeting. Their participation and engagement are vital to the success of our mission.

VACCC Hosts “Coffee & Conversation” with Veterans at Brookfield VFW

February 27, 2026



The VACCC hosted a “Coffee & Conversation” gathering at the Brookfield VFW Post, bringing together Veterans, family members, and community partners for an open and informal discussion with VACCC leadership. The event was designed as a dialogue rather than a presentation, giving attendees the opportunity to ask questions, share their experiences, and speak directly with staff about the challenges and opportunities facing Veterans in their communities.

Participants were able to discuss topics such as VA benefits, claims assistance, and available local resources, while also providing valuable feedback about services and support systems in Cook County. Events like Coffee & Conversation help strengthen the connection between the VACCC and the Veteran community by creating a welcoming space for open communication, ensuring veterans feel heard while learning more about the programs and assistance available to them.



VACCC Expands Outreach Through Partnerships with Cook County Universities

February 28, 2026

The VACCC has expanded its community outreach efforts by establishing regular office hours at several of Cook County's leading institutions of higher education, including DePaul University, the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), Prairie State College, and Loyola University Chicago.

Through these on-campus office hours, VACCC staff provide direct access to information and assistance for benefits, emergency financial assistance, claims support, and community resources for student Veterans and their families. By bringing services directly to campus, the VACCC aims to ensure that Veterans pursuing higher education have convenient access to the support systems available to them.



These partnerships will continue throughout the academic year and are designed to build lasting relationships with each institution's Veteran and military-connected student communities. The VACCC leadership hopes the initiative will grow into a sustainable, long-term collaboration that continues to serve new generations of student Veterans as they enroll and transition into civilian careers.

By maintaining a consistent presence at both public and private universities across Cook County, the Commission is reinforcing its commitment to meeting Veterans where they are and ensuring they remain connected to the resources they have earned.



VACCC Veterans Service Officer Impact Report February 2026

February marked another month of meaningful progress for Veterans served by the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County (VACCC). Through dedicated outreach, case development, and direct representation, VACCC Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) continued to connect Veterans with the benefits they have earned through their service.

Every form submitted represents more than administrative activity, it reflects a Veteran taking a critical step forward toward accessing federal benefits, protecting their effective date, or strengthening the evidence necessary to support a claim.

VACCC VSOs play an essential role in guiding Veterans through the complexities of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits system. By providing informed representation and strategic guidance, our team helps ensure Veterans do not lose access to benefits simply because the process is difficult to navigate.

Why This Work Matters

Many Veterans do not lose benefits because they are ineligible. Benefits are often delayed or denied because the claims process is complicated and highly procedural.

Common challenges Veterans face include:

- Required forms not being filed correctly
- Effective dates not being protected early in the process
- Missing or incomplete medical evidence
- Selecting the wrong review option after a denial

VACCC Veteran Service Officers help Veterans avoid these obstacles by translating VA regulations into a clear and effective benefits strategy.



VACCC Veterans Service Officer Impact Report February 2026

February 2026 Activity Snapshot

According to VetraSpec reporting from February 1 through February 28, VACCC VSOs supported significant claims activity across Cook County:

- 129 Veterans established representation through Power of Attorney (VA Form 21-22), allowing VACCC to formally advocate on their behalf before the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- 105 Veterans filed an Intent to File (VA Form 21-0966), preserving potential effective dates and protecting future backpay while evidence is gathered.
- 91 new disability compensation claims (VA Form 21-526EZ) were submitted, initiating the formal benefits review process.
- 45 Supplemental Claims (VA Form 20-0995) were submitted to introduce new evidence for previously decided issues.
- 14 Higher-Level Reviews (VA Form 20-0996) were filed to challenge potential VA errors in prior decisions.

In total, more than 150 claims, reviews, and appeals actions were initiated or supported by VACCC VSOs in February.

Each of these cases represents a Veteran whose claim is now actively moving through the VA decision process.

What This Means for Veterans

The Intent to File process allows Veterans to secure a potential benefits start date while they gather supporting documentation such as medical records, service records, and personal statements.

By filing 105 Intent to Files in February, VACCC helped Veterans preserve their timelines and reduce the risk of losing months of potential backpay.



VACCC Veterans Service Officer Impact Report February 2026

Assistance with VA Decisions or Denials

Veterans who receive a VA decision letter do not have to navigate the next steps alone.

VACCC VSOs can help Veterans:

- understand what the VA decision means
- identify whether the decision can be challenged
- determine the most appropriate review option
- develop an evidence plan to strengthen the case
- submit the appropriate appeal within required deadlines

Preparing for a VSO Appointment

To assist Veterans as efficiently as possible, we recommend bringing the following documents to your appointment:

- your VA decision letter(s)
- DD-214 (if available)
- any private medical records related to your claim
- copies of VA treatment records, if available
- notes describing your symptoms and how they affect daily life

The VA decision letter is often the most important document in determining the best path forward.

What Veterans Can Expect

During an appointment with a VACCC Veteran Service Officer, Veterans can expect:

- a review of their claim or decision status
- confirmation of important deadlines
- guidance on evidence needed to strengthen their claim
- assistance submitting the appropriate VA forms
- follow-up planning for continued claim development

Moving Forward

Whether filing a new claim, protecting an effective date, or challenging a VA decision, VACCC Veteran Service Officers are committed to helping Veterans move forward with clarity and confidence.

Veterans seeking assistance are encouraged to contact the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County to schedule an appointment with a Veteran Service Officer.

Contact US



Scan now to follow
us on our Social
Media



Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center

1100 S. Hamilton Ave, C-011

(LL)Chicago, IL 60612

(312) 433-6010

VACCC@cookcountyil.gov



To speak to a
representative and
learn more about our
services, please scan
QR code or visit

<https://hovqr.to/de421623>



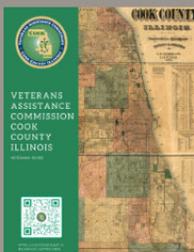
George W. Dunne Cook County Administration Building

69 W. Washington Chicago, IL

Suite 1420

(312) 603-3865

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For a Digital Copy of our
Veterans Resources
Guide please scan

