

Monthly Muster

MARCH 2026



VACCC Highlights Impact of Veterans with Disabilities Exemption at Cook County Assessor Event

VACCC Hosts Successful Quarterly Resource Fair and Commission Meeting at Hines VA Hospital

VACCC Highlights Impact of Veterans with Disabilities Exemption at Cook County Assessor Event



The Cook County Assessor's Office hosted a public event highlighting the Veterans with Disabilities Property Tax Exemption, an important benefit designed to provide property tax relief to qualifying Veterans. Representing the VACCC, Veterans Service Manager Derek Giffin delivered remarks sharing both his professional insight and personal experience with the program. As a Veteran rated at 100% disability, Derek spoke to the meaningful financial impact of the exemption, noting that he has not paid property taxes since receiving the benefit. His testimony underscored the real-world value of ensuring eligible Veterans are aware of and able to access this wonderful benefit.



From the VACCC's perspective, the event served as an important opportunity to connect outreach efforts with direct impact. In addition to sharing his story, Giffin highlighted the VACCC's role in assisting Veterans with navigating VA disability claims, which can directly influence eligibility for the exemption. By increasing a Veteran's disability rating through proper claims development and representation, VACCC services can help open the door to substantial financial benefits such as this program. The VACCC remains committed to ensuring Veterans throughout Cook County are informed, supported, and connected to the full range of benefits they have earned through their service.



Serving Those Who Served

March 2026: Continued Commitment

As we close out the month of March, I am proud to share that the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County (VACCC) continues to deliver meaningful, direct support to our Veteran community. In March 2026, the VACCC provided a total of **\$121,172.69** in direct financial assistance to Veterans across the County!

Our focus on essential daily needs remained a top priority, with nearly **\$38,000** dedicated to food and hygiene assistance. At the same time, we continued to address housing insecurity, providing over \$23,000 in rental and mortgage assistance, helping Veterans remain safely housed during challenging times. Utility assistance also represented a significant portion of our support, totaling more than **\$28,000** across gas, electric, and water services. These figures reflect the continued financial pressures many households are facing, and the VACCC's role in helping to alleviate that burden.

Veteran Financial Disbursements	
Burial	\$ 28,127.50
Food Cards	\$ 24,200.00
Rent	\$ 15,157.75
Hygiene	\$ 13,700.00
Gas	\$ 12,787.13
Electric	\$ 12,785.53
Mortgage	\$ 8,489.43
Water	\$ 2,861.15
CTA 7-Day	\$ 1,886.00
CTA Single Ride	\$ 368.50
Telephone	\$ 300.00
Gas Cards	\$ 300.00
Internet	\$ 209.70
Total Disbursements	\$ 121,172.69

We also remained committed to honoring our Veterans and supporting their families during times of loss, with **\$28,127.50** provided in burial and memorial assistance. This is one of the most solemn, yet important responsibilities we carry. Beyond financial assistance, our team maintained strong engagement across Cook County. In March alone, we recorded 338 in-office visits, handled **606 calls**, hosted **36 outreach events**, and welcomed **53 new Veterans** into VACCC services.

These numbers are more than metrics, they represent trust, connection, and lives impacted. March reflects what we strive for every day: operational readiness, compassionate service, and measurable impact. As we move forward, we remain focused on expanding outreach, and ensuring every Veteran in Cook County knows that support is not only available but accessible. To our dedicated VAC team and our partners across the County, thank you for your continued commitment to this mission. Together, we are making a difference!

Elizabeth D. Soto

Superintendent
Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County

MARCH IN MOTION

March wasn't just productive, it was powerful. The Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County continues to drive real financial impact, real access, and real outcomes for Veterans and their families.

\$140,249.01 in retroactive payments secured for Veterans in ONE Month. That's money in the pockets of Cook County Veterans, because someone showed up and did the work.

MARCH BREAKDOWN

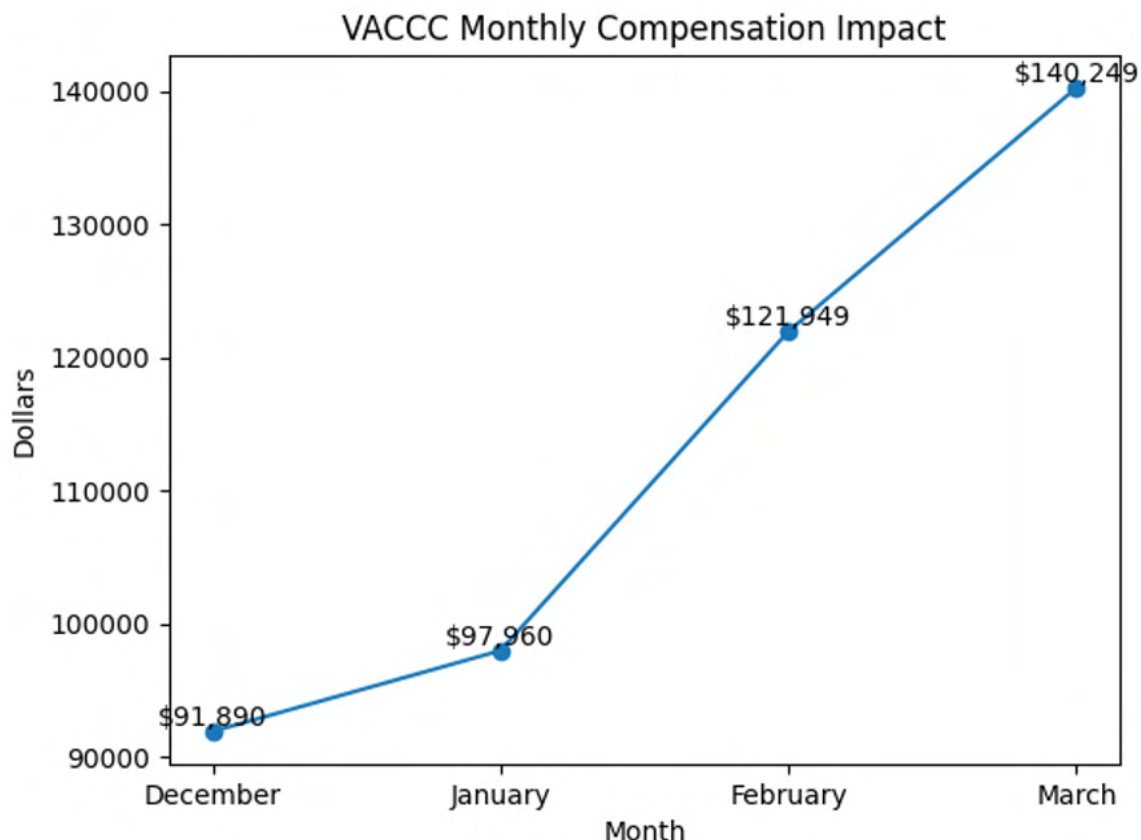
This is what boots-on-the-ground execution looks like:

133 Power of Attorneys (VA Form 21-22)
→ 133 Veterans said: "I trust VACCC to fight for me."

147 Intent to Files (VA Form 21-0966)
→ Locked in benefits. Protected effective dates. Preserved retroactive pay.

102 New Claims Filed (VA Form 21-526EZ)
→ Fully developed claims, done right the first time.

96 Appeals & Decision Reviews
→ We don't walk away from denials, we challenge them.



VETERAN FOCUS – MST & SPECIALIZED OUTREACH

Trauma-Informed Care. Confidential Support.
Real Access.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE. YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN.

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) affects more Veterans than many realize and for many it was never reported.

Not because it didn't happen, but because the environment didn't feel safe.

At VACCC, we recognize that reality, and we respond with care, intention, and action. VACCC's MST Benefits Briefings & Claims Clinics are designed to provide a safe, confidential, and trauma-informed environment where Veterans can take the first step on their own terms.

2026 MST CLINIC SERIES

VACCC is hosting a year-long series of MST-focused clinics, each tailored to meet the needs of specific Veteran communities:

APRIL – Student Veterans & MST
MAY – LGBTQ+ Veterans & MST
JUNE – Homelessness & Reentry Support
JULY – MST Among Deployed & Combat-Era Veterans
AUGUST – Evidence & Statement Development
SEPTEMBER – Barriers to Reporting & Discharges
OCTOBER – MST & Domestic Violence Awareness
NOVEMBER – Healing Pathways: Trauma, Grief & Identity

Briefing: 9:00 AM | Clinics: 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM
In-person (Downtown Chicago) & Virtual Options Available

These clinics create a pathway to:

- Be heard without judgment
- Access care and treatment
- Receive the benefits they've earned

Because healing doesn't start with paperwork.

It starts with feeling safe enough to take the first step.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Justyna Berry

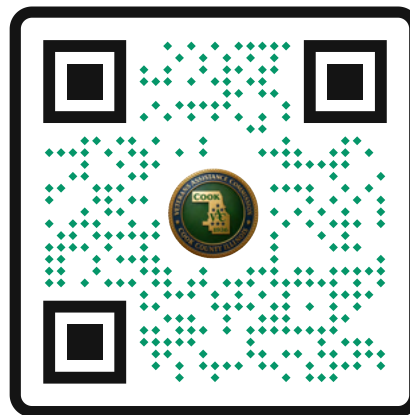
Veterans Service Manager

Justyna.Berry@cookcountyiil.gov

773-520-6950 (Call or Text)

Register:

Scan the QR code to RSVP



<https://hov.to/3cd8c501>

CONFIDENTIAL. SUPPORTIVE. VETERAN-CENTERED.

This is not just about claims.

This is about restoring trust, access, and dignity.

Coffee and Conversation

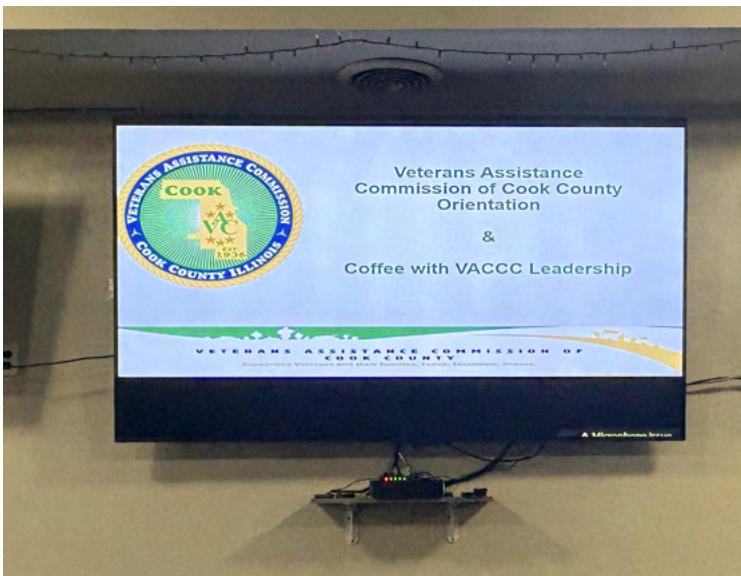


VACCC hosted a Coffee with Leadership event at the Bridgeview VFW, bringing together Veterans, families, and community members for meaningful conversation and connection.

The event created a welcoming space where Veterans could speak directly with VACCC leadership, ask questions, and better understand the benefits and services available to them. Leadership shared updates on expanding outreach across Cook County, increasing access to accredited Veteran Service Officers, and strengthening support for undeserved Veteran populations.

What stood out most was the opportunity for real dialogue. Veterans shared their experiences and received immediate guidance, with several able to begin or continue their claims on site. These moments reflect the true purpose of VACCC's work: access, trust, and action.

Coffee with Leadership events continue to play a vital role in ensuring Veterans remain informed, supported, and connected to the resources they have earned.



OUTREACH HIGHLIGHT

MARCH 24, 2026

VACCC Hosts Successful Quarterly Resource Fair and Commission Meeting at Hines VA Hospital

The VACCC hosted its quarterly Resource Fair and Commission Meeting at the Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital, bringing together a wide range of partners and stakeholders dedicated to serving Veterans across the region. Coordinated in partnership with the Hines VA Outreach Program, the event featured participation from the Office of Speaker Emanuel “Chris” Welch, Honor Flight, Rush University Medical Center, Illinois Joining Forces, VA Suicide Prevention, VA Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Vet Center. The Resource Fair provided Veterans and attendees with direct access to critical services, while also serving as an opportunity to introduce newly appointed Commission members to the VACCC’s mission, operations, and extensive network of community partners.

Following the Resource Fair, the Commission Meeting provided a comprehensive briefing on the VACCC’s activities over the previous quarter. Leadership shared key data points, including the volume of services delivered to Veterans, ongoing outreach initiatives, and the continued expansion of partnerships aimed at improving access to care and benefits. The VACCC was represented by Veterans Service Managers Justyna Berry and Derek Giffin, along with Communications and Outreach Manager Conner Inness, who collectively highlighted the organization’s commitment to transparency, accountability, and service excellence. The event underscored the importance of collaboration in ensuring Veterans throughout Cook County are informed, supported, and connected to the resources they have earned through their service.



VACCC Hosts Claims Clinic at VFW Post 5079, Assisting Veterans with Benefits and Claims

The VACCC hosted a Claims Clinic and Resource Event at VFW Post 5079, providing direct, in-person assistance to Veterans seeking support with their VA claims and benefits. Veterans Service Officers Faris Karadsheh and Derek Giffin were on site throughout the day, working one-on-one with more than two dozen Veterans to address questions, review documentation, and assist with new and ongoing claims filings. The clinic offered a hands-on opportunity for Veterans to receive professional guidance and ensure their applications were properly prepared and submitted.

The event highlighted VACCC's continued commitment to meeting Veterans where they are by bringing essential services directly into the community. By partnering with local VFW posts and trusted community spaces, VACCC is able to expand access to accredited representation and ensure Veterans receive the benefits they have earned through their service. The Claims Clinic at Post 5079 not only delivered immediate support to those in attendance but also strengthened connections within the Veteran community, reinforcing the importance of outreach and accessibility in advancing VACCC's mission.



The Major Richard Star Act: A Matter of Fairness for Veterans

From the Perspective of a Veterans Service Officer Manager, Derek Giffin every day, I work with Veterans who are trying to navigate the transition from service to civilian life while dealing with service-connected disabilities.

What many don't realize is that some medically retired Veterans are required to give up a portion of their military retirement pay in order to receive VA disability compensation. This is something I have to explain far too often, and it's frustrating for the Veterans who earned both.

The Major Richard Star Act would correct this by allowing medically retired Veterans to receive both their full retirement pay and VA disability compensation. This matters because many of these Veterans did not choose to leave service early. They were forced out due to injuries or conditions connected to their service. Despite that, they are treated differently than Veterans who completed 20 or more years and qualify for both benefits without reduction.

From where I sit, that doesn't feel right. Military retirement is based on time in service. VA disability compensation is based on the impact of service-related injuries. They serve two different purposes, and both are earned. I see the impact this has on Veterans and their families.

They are trying to build stability, manage their health, and move forward, all while navigating a system that reduces benefits they should be able to rely on.

The Major Richard Star Act is about fixing that gap. It is about fairness. It is about recognizing service and sacrifice fully. And it is about making sure Veterans receive what they have earned without having to choose between them.



CLAIM STRATEGY & DEVELOPMENT

Q: What is the difference between **primary, secondary, and aggravated conditions?**

A: Primary: Directly caused by service

Secondary: Caused by an existing service-connected condition

Aggravated: Pre-existing condition worsened by service

A VSO helps identify all possible connections—this can significantly increase your rating.

Q: What is “VA math” and why does my rating seem off?

A: VA uses a combined rating formula, not simple addition.

Example: $50\% + 50\% \neq 100\%$

A VSO can break this down and ensure your rating is calculated correctly.

MEDICAL EVIDENCE & EXAMS

Q: What is a C&P exam and how important is it?

A: A Compensation & Pension (C&P) exam is often the most critical part of your claim.

What you say—and how it’s documented—can directly impact your rating.

Q: Do I need to go to the VA for treatment to file a claim?

A: No. You can use private medical records—as long as they support your condition and service connection.

Q: What if the C&P exam is wrong or incomplete?

A: You can challenge it. Options include:

- Submitting a statement in support of claim
- Requesting a new exam
- Filing a Supplemental Claim or HLR
- This is where VSOs make a major difference.

CONTACT US

MARCH 2026



Scan now to follow us on our Social Media

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



<https://hovqr.to/de421623>

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Chicago , IL 60612

(312) 433-6010

vacc@cookcountyIL.gov



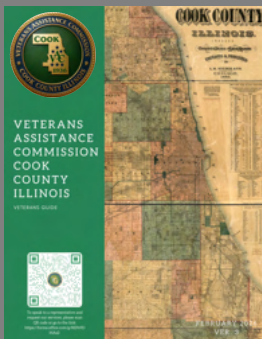
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MARCH 2026



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