



SERVING THE VETERANS OF COOK COUNTY ILLINOIS

President Frank Gutierrez
Superintendent Elizabeth D. Soto

Volume 2—August 2024



Perhaps The Largest VAC Meeting In Illinois History

Tuesday, 25 June 2024 was a very special day for the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County when a regular quarterly meeting of its members that took place at the Hines VA hospital Auditorium attracted almost 200 attendees!. This was quite possibly the largest such meeting in the history of Illinois VACs. Present were 52 Delegates and Alternates representing 33 of its 34 member organizations along with many other veteran members, a uniformed Color Guard, several representatives of various veterans resource organizations. Other notable guests included Terry Prince, Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Cook County Commissioners Tara Stamps and Josina Morita, both of whom are members of the Cook County Veterans Committee, Diana Huizar, representing the office of Commissioner Maggie Trevor, Shannon Yount of the Illinois Attorney General's Military and Veterans Rights Bureau, veterans representing other VACs and many other concerned Illinois residents who attended to show their support for Illinois veterans generally and the VACCC specifically.

The meeting was called to order by new President Frank Gutierrez at 1900hrs. He was elected for the 2024-2025 term at the March 26, 2024 Membership Meeting along with the other elected and non-voting appointees listed on the last page. Prior to the beginning of the business meeting President Gutierrez introduced Ms. Yount who gave a presentation about the Illinois Attorney General's Military and Veterans Rights Bureau. The MVRB is the only office of its kind in the US and

is staffed by attorneys. It is dedicated to ensuring that veterans and active duty military members receive the benefits they have earned. The Bureau provides men and women with assistance, including case advocacy, health outreach and public advocacy forums. More information about the Bureau and the services it provides can be found at: www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov/rights-of-the-people/military-and-veterans-rights. The Helpline number is: 1(800)382-3000.

Superintendent Soto's report for the Second Quarter was very positive. Financial disbursements and the number of vets served were up significantly over the First Quarter. Development of the new website is progressing and, very importantly, four new jobs were posted, including an Outreach Coordinator and a VSO. Several applications are under review. Elizabeth is looking at possible sites for our new home in River Grove. Most of the acquisition costs will be paid via an earmark grant from US Representative Delia Ramirez

Some of our guests were asked to make comments, two of which were quite important. Commissioners Morita and Stamps both made very positive remarks about the meeting and VACCC, pledging their support as members of the Veterans Committee. This bodes very well for our future. The public comments were also quite complementary to the Board, Elizabeth and her staff. 2nd VP DeGroot closed out the comments with a call for a round of applause for Elizabeth which was very loud and sustained. He said, *"the days of a dysfunctional VACCC are over!"*

Presidents Message



The VACCC Office has done remarkable work, providing consistently improving services despite having only 3 personnel. However, we could be doing much more to support the veteran community. Our budget has increased significantly from 2023, and our staff allocation is the highest it's ever been. Yet, the

veteran community continues to face obstacles due to insufficient support the VACCC has received.

While I'm grateful to our county commissioners for supporting the veteran community, I'm disappointed by the lack of support from Cook County itself. There is no reason we have gone over a year and a half without filling a single vacancy. As if it couldn't get any worse, current office personnel have yet to receive the salary increases that were approved for 2024 even though they have been performing the work of offices with much larger staff.

Our nation's veterans depend on the critical services we provide. We will need to ask more of you in the coming days. I urge you to stay engaged in this fight - it may be the most important battle we've faced on the home front. If we succeed, the impact will be felt by veterans for generations to come. As I have said before, **"The work we do saves lives."**

Vice Presidents Message



The Veterans Assistance commission of Cook County (VACCC) has been growing and making an impact on the veterans and their families within Cook County.

In this increased growth to servicing more veterans, we need to be fully staffed and able to service veterans and their families in all parts of Cook

County, north, south, east, and west regions of County.

The Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County is mandated by state law, 330 ILCS 45, Veterans Assistance Act, to serve veterans within Cook County. With that being said, we must have the staff and funds to exercise the mandate of the law.

As the VACCC continues to grow, we need to be mindful of the purpose of the VACCC and circulate our purpose to all veterans, which is to provide the just and necessary assistance and services to those veterans, their families, and the families of deceased Veterans.

This purpose will also aid veterans and families to work with service officers (VSO) to help with filing claims and benefits. I would not encourage any veteran to try and file a claim on their own. A trained certified service officer will be able to help the veteran gather the necessary documentation, fill out paperwork, and represent veterans in appeals

if needed. A VSO can offer guidance based upon individual needs and circumstances.

I would respectfully ask that Cook County provide the necessary funds so the VACCC can hire the staff and provide the funds to service more veterans in Cook County.

2nd Vice Presidents Message



Our VACCC has seen much improvement because of our elected officials, staff, members, and supporters. Unfortunately, we still find roadblocks in implementing change because of confusion on the part of county departments whose support we need. The **Military & Veterans Assistance Act (MVAA)** is clear on this, but it seems that our public servants can't

comprehend. We will remedy this, but it takes time and effort. This should be the focus our mission. Despite these hurdles, Superintendent Soto has reported that we are breaking records helping veterans. The staff currently consists of the Superintendent and 2 other employees. Imagine what could be done if we have more staff and expanded services to assist our veterans and their families.

Your VACCC board has finalized a budget proposal to present to the Cook County Board. Both boards are responsible for how the taxpayer money is spent. Our office accounts for every penny of those funds. We must make sure it is used in the most efficient way.... Bang for the buck!

The front page and photos show the incredible meeting that took place on 25 June. I want to personally thank outreach specialist Jesus Molina and others from Hines VA, as well as Shannon Yount from the Illinois Attorney Generals Military and Veterans Rights Bureau, Commissioners Morita & Stamps (both members of the CC Veterans Committee) for their contributions. Thanks also to all the vendors who participated. But special thanks goes out to the vast number of veterans that took time out from their lives to go to Hines and support the VACCC. Veterans do make a difference.

If you look at the next page you will see that the Governor signed on 6 August **SB3479**, a historic bill that will make it a penalty to those deemed claim sharks who charge veterans for services that should be free. If you or someone you know has been taken advantage of by one of these unaccredited claim sharks, please contact the Illinois Attorney Generals Military and Veterans Rights Bureau at **1-800-382-3000**.

In closing, let me remind our many member organizations that you are the front line for the VACCC. Membership opens on **1 January 2025**. Please renew your membership. Hopefully new posts will also apply for membership. The VACCC will not prosper without an active membership that will show up in person.



Office of the Governor JB Pritzker

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Tuesday, August 6, 2024

CONTACT: Gov.Press@illinois.gov

CHICAGO- Today, Governor JB Pritzker signed SB3479 into law, also known as the Veteran’s Consumer Fraud Bill. The legislation broadens the definition of “veteran or military benefits services” to include any consultation services that would assist in obtaining, changing, or appealing benefits decisions. The bill also targets predatory “claim sharks,” or non-VA accredited individuals or companies that charge for consultation and filing services. These services are offered for free through government and non-profits across Illinois.

“Our state’s veterans and military members always deserve clarity and protection when navigating the social services process,” **said Governor JB Pritzker**. “With these amendments to the Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act, we can ensure claim sharks are prevented from charging Illinoisans hefty fees for services that are offered for free statewide. I want to thank my partners in the General Assembly, especially this bill’s chief sponsors: Senator Mike Porfirio and Representative Stephanie Kifowit, for their dedication to getting this bill passed.”

The legislation makes three substantive changes to the Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act:

1. Adds language to the definition of “veteran or military benefits services” to include “consulting or coaching in the preparation, presentation, or prosecution of claims or other attempts to obtain benefits” as a service.
2. Adds disclosure language to ensure veterans and military members are better informed about the services offered to them. Additionally, all county veteran service officers must now be VA accredited.
3. Adds language to clarify that failure to provide a veteran’s services disclosure orally and in writing at the outset of a business relationship is an unlawful practice. Under current law, all private businesses must inform potential clients that consultation services are provided for free by local, state and federal governments.

The new legislation goes into effect January 1, 2025.

“IDVA has heard unimaginable stories from veterans who have lost thousands of dollars of their earned benefits to services taking advantage of them, often at their most vulnerable,” **said IDVA Director Terry Prince**. “We are grateful to the bill’s sponsors Senator Mike Porfirio & Representative Stephanie Kifowit, and Governor Pritzker for advocating for veterans by securing these important protections. We encourage veterans to contact IDVA Veterans Service Officers positioned around the state and equipped to help them navigate their benefits and services, free of charge.”

“I want to thank Governor Pritzker for signing this important piece of legislation, and I applaud Attorney General Kwame Raoul and the outstanding team at the Military and Veterans Rights Bureau in the Office of the Attorney General for their help and support on this legislation and all they do every day to protect and serve veterans in the state of Illinois. It is our duty to protect and respect our nation’s veterans, not make them a victim to predatory practices,” **said State Senator Mike Porfirio (D-Lyons Township)**. “The enactment of this law ensures those who offer veteran and military benefits are held to the highest standards, safeguarding our military heroes from exploitation. The benefits they earned through their service and sacrifice should go into the pockets of veterans themselves so they can pursue the American dream for which they fought and served.”

“We are taking needed action against ‘claim sharks’ who scam my fellow Veterans and their families who are trying to access the benefits they are rightfully owed,” **said Rep. Stephanie Kifowit (D-Oswego)**. “It’s unconscionable to me that anyone would want to target our heroes like this after the sacrifices they have made for our country. This is a necessary update to our law that will help ensure our Veterans receive the respect, benefits and protections they deserve.”

VACCC Membership Meeting 25 June 2024



Left Ray Perez VFW 1337 & American Legion 525 Post member greets attendees. — VACCC Board Members take a moment to reflect at the beginning of the meeting



Commissioners Morita & Stamps attended showing support for the veterans of Cook County



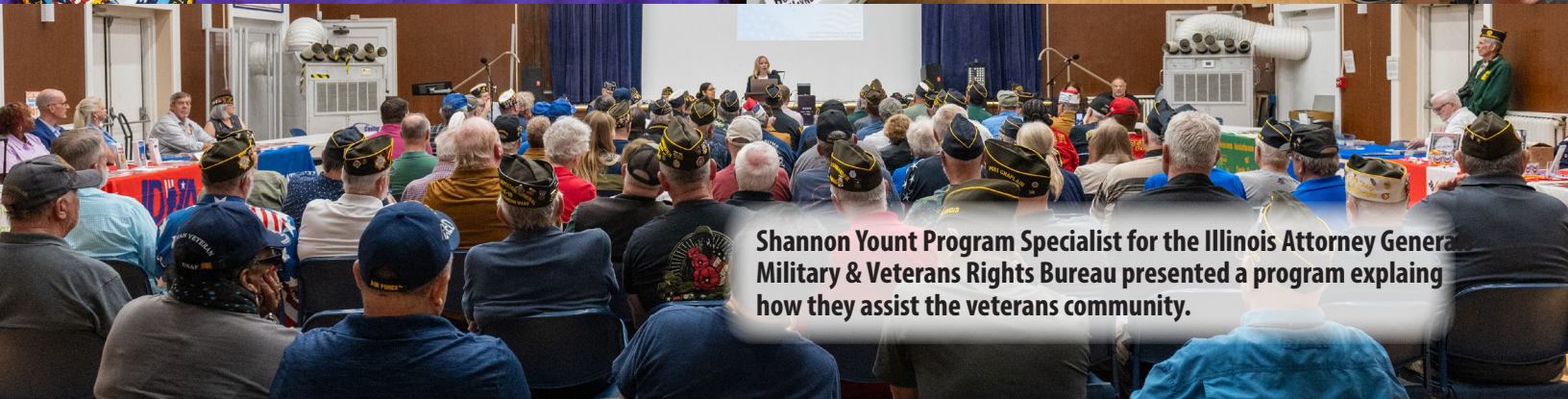
IDVA Director Terry Prince addresses the large audience



Jesus G. Molina Jr. VA Outreach Coordinator Communications Specialist was instrumental in organizing the event



The VFW 4th District Color Guard Presents the Colors



Shannon Yount Program Specialist for the Illinois Attorney General Military & Veterans Rights Bureau presented a program explaining how they assist the veterans community.

Superintendent Soto's Message



The VACCC has experienced a dynamic mix of challenges and progress this year. While continuing to provide immediate emergency financial assistance and additional resources to the Cook County Veteran community, we have successfully navigated legislative

updates to the Military Veterans Assistance Act (MVAA), which designated our department as a local unit of government. Despite operating with only three full-time staff members, at the midyear point, our office has managed to:

- Answer **1,531** phone calls
- Attend **98** outreach events
- Maintain over **70** partnership relationships
- Engage with more than **15** Alderpersons through an Intergovernmental Task Force led by JBVA Market Growth Director Grant Jacobson and City of Chicago Mayor's Office Director of Veterans Affairs Kevin Barszcz.

This Vet Connects initiative has increased the visibility of VACCC services in Ward offices throughout the City of Chicago and will soon extend to several Cook County Commissioner offices, making our services more accessible to Veterans across the county.

Most notably, the VACCC provided **\$270,558.45** in emergency financial assistance to **1,287** Veterans at the close of mid-year.

Staffing Update

• Of the 11 approved positions for FY24, 3 are filled by the current staff: VACCC Executive Assistant, Mrs. Vanessa Meadows, Veteran Service Caseworker, Mr. Peter Bencak and myself as the Superintendent, leaving 8 vacancies:

- **1, Manager, Finance and Business Operations**
- **1, Manager, Veteran Services**
- **1, Business Operations Specialist**
- **1, Administrative Assistant IV**
- **1, Communications and Outreach Coordinator**
- **3, Veteran Service Officers**

Significant progress has been made in filling these positions, with seven now posted and active interviews underway. The anticipated Veteran Service Officers are expected to provide substantial support for Veteran claims within our Cook County Veteran community, potentially generating significant returns on investment for the entire Cook County economy.

We anticipate filling all positions prior to the conclusion of FY24.

Future Goals and Achievements

The VAC's goals for this fiscal year included introducing new benefits and services to more Cook County Veterans. Due to staffing constraints, the office was only able to introduced the new hygiene card benefit, which provides Veterans and their dependents with financial assistance towards their unique hygienic needs. However, once our new staff members are onboarded, we plan to roll out additional services such as the gas card for Veterans with vehicles, and more.

Exciting Developments

The VACCC has since pursued new grant funding opportunities, including a Congressional Appropriations request for an additional Veterans Assistance Commission Community Economic Development Center in Congressional District IL-03. This new center will offer services such as employment readiness and social services, aiming to empower Veterans and foster economic growth. If approved, potentially in the 4th quarter of FY24, this initiative will receive \$1.2 million, significantly benefiting our suburban Cook County Veterans and their families.

It is truly an honor to be a part of the incredible progress the VACCC has accomplished this year. Our team's dedication and resilience have been inspiring, and I am proud of the strides we have made in supporting our Veteran community. The challenges we have faced have only strengthened our commitment to serving those who have served and as we look forward to the future, I am confident that we will continue to achieve even greater success in enhancing the lives of Cook County Veterans.

Thank you for your ongoing support and trust in the VACCC. Together, we are making a meaningful difference in the lives of our Veterans and their families.

To register for 24 September meeting

<https://signupschedule.com/dutch>



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www.facebook.com/VACofCookCounty



Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County

Membership Meeting Minutes

25 June 2024

To be voted on 24 Sept. Meeting

Location:

Edward Hines, Jr. VA
5000 5th Ave, Hines, IL 60141

(Executive Board Members): Frank Gutierrez (*President*), William Browne (*1st Vice President*), Dutch DeGroot (*2nd Vice President*), Robert Arciola (*Treasurer*).
At Large Board Members: Greg Jacobs, Wayne Kern, John Steciw.
Non voting **Appointees** Jim Parker (*Secretary*), Kevin Ake (*Chaplain*), Gina A. LoGalbo (*Judge Advocate*), Lorenzo Fiorentino (*Sargent at Arms*), Elizabeth Soto (*Superintendent*)

I. Welcome – President Gutierrez.

a. Call to order at 1900hrs.

b. Roll Call/Quorum – 2nd VP DeGroot called the roll of members and announced 33 members attending which exceeds the quorum requirement of 19. A copy of the Sign In Sheet is attached to and a part of these Minutes. Frank introduced the following guest: Terry Prince Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs. CC Commissioner Tara Stamps, CC Commissioner Josina Morita, Diana Huizar, representative of CC Commissioner Maggie Trevor, and Shannon Yount of Illinois Attorney General's Military and Veterans Rights Bureau.

II. Opening

a. Prayer/Reflection– Chaplain Kevin Ake

b. Posting of the Colors VFW 4th District color guard

c. Pledge of Allegiance.

d. DeGroot gave a short report on membership.

III. Special Presentation -- Sharon Yount of Attorney General's Military and Veterans Rights Bureau gave an overview report on her organization:

a. Her office is the only one like in the US.

b. Its Mission is three-fold:

1. Education and Outreach to Illinois veterans regarding their rights and assistance offered. Informative presentations are available to veteran organizations. Additional, printed materials are available at her table.

2. Enforcement of the rights of Illinois veterans under the laws of this State.

3. Advise and represent the AG's Office in legal matters involving our veterans.

c. The entire staff of attorneys in her office is made up of veterans.

d. Attorneys are assigned to specialized subject matter areas.

IV. Consent Agenda – President Gutierrez.

a. Approval of Minutes of March 26 Membership Meeting. The Minutes were not read but were distributed to all members in advance of this meeting. Motion to Approve the Minutes made by James Schultz and duly seconded. The motion was passed by unanimous voice vote.

V. Governance Report – Treasurer Aricola

a. He reported that the Membership Corp. account balance of \$5,026.57 was confirmed on a review of recovered financial records that were reviewed the last E.B. meeting.

VI. VACCC Office Reports – Superintendent Elizabeth Soto on the following for the second quarter:

a. Financial & Disbursement Reports. We had a 30% increase in dollar expenditures and a 10% increase in veterans served from the 1st quarter.

b. Veterans Served race & gender Reports.

c. Monthly Outreach Report. The staff spent 49 hours doing Outreach presentations. We had a new programs of Walgreens gift cards for veterans, new building signage and the recent dedication of a new mural at the office.

d. Communications/Website Update. We are working with CC staff on a website. 2nd VP DeGroot is leading this effort.

e. Cook County HR and Staff Hiring Update. We recently posted four new staff positions: a VSO, an Outreach Coordinator, an Operations Specialist and an Administrative Assistant.

VII. Bylaws – John Steciw

a. Steciw gave the Second Reading of the following proposed amendment, the First Reading of which was held at the March membership Meeting and which was approved by the EB at its June 5 meeting:

“Article V SECTION 5.6 Meetings F. The President may change the date of a regularly scheduled Quarterly Membership meeting when necessary, provided prior notice is given and requirements of the Illinois Open Meetings Act are met.”

Upon a proper Motion by Art Ellingsen, duly seconded, the foregoing was approved by unanimous voice vote.

VIII. Budget – 1st VP Browne

a. No report at this time but he will be looking for volunteers with financial skills to assist when it's time to work on the next budget.

IX. Services Provided. AL Board Member Kern

a. Reported that there is no longer a Committee for this. Since the last meeting only one request for service was received regarding White Sox tickets which requires further study.

X. Future Meeting Sites Update -- 2nd VP DeGroot

a. DeGroot said that AML Post 1941, 900 LaGrange Road LaGrange, has agreed to this location for the September 24, 2024 meeting.

XI. Old Business -- President Gutierrez

- a. President Gutierrez suggested further discussions regarding the Membership Corp. be tabled until the next meeting.

XII. New Business – President Gutierrez

- a. Proposed Federal Grant. Tabled.

XIII. Comments from Special Guests:

- a. Commissioner Morita said her predecessor was a vet and she promised to continue his support for them. She also apologized for the lack of sufficient funds to properly run the VACCC in the passed and pledged to do better. In her District she has been working to improve services to veterans, especial regarding dental care.
- b. Commissioner Stamps echoed Commission Morita said a large part of her motivation comes from the fact that she takes care of her elderly uncle who is a veteran. She also said that going forward her support of the VACCC will be guided by her new slogan, "We can demand more." She added that the budget should reflect the County's support for vets.
- c. Director Prince promised the vets that his office will remain dedicated to help all Illinois vets. The IDVA has received its largest budget in history and it is being used. As an example, he pointed to the recent opening of a 200-bed residential facility for vets in Oak Park.

XIV. Public Comments for Items Not on the Agenda -- Frank Gutierrez.

- a. Greg Jacobs ask what is being done about Claim sharks in Illinois? Ms. Yount said that her office can assist veteran with Claim Shark issues.
- b. Ron Gillespie said that he is from Lake County and their vets will support the VACCC.
- c. Paul Knutson said that he is very proud of the organization and congratulated the VACCC leadership in making it much better.
- d. Steve MacGinnis said that he is also from Lake County and that when he sees that changes in the VACCC all he can say to Elizabeth is, "WOW!"
- e. A representative of VFW Post 3579 gave a shout out to the EB for its efforts to move the VACCC to a new location.
- f. Ms. Owens, representing herself, asked how small business can get certified to do more for the VACCC. President Gutierrez said the CC website has guidelines for this.
- g. Pat Kowalski, a volunteer at the Hines Food Bank, mentioned the terrible quality of food there. She said our vets deserve better and requested the VACCC's help in this regard.
- h. Mark Kwiatkowski ask if there were plans to have VACCC offices in the North and West suburbs. Elizabeth said the River Grove site was selected because it will be funded by an ear mark grant from Rep. Ramirez and it is in her District. When that is completed the VACCC will seek to added offices where most needed by vets.
- i. 2nd VP DeGroot requested an ovation for Elizabeth and her staff for their hard work and dedication and got a very loud one. He closed with, "The days of a dysfunctional VACCC are done!"

XV. Adjournment.

President Gutierrez closed with a thank you to the Commissioners, guest and members for attending. "We are moving forward and will keep going."

Upon a proper Motion by Mark Kwiatkowski, duly seconded, the meeting was adjourned at 2016 hrs.

Submitted by **Jim Parker**, Secretary



Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County

The Veterans Assistance Commission is in the process of developing their own website. In the interim the VFW 4th district has donated a page to make information for members and the public to be informed and offer transparency.

VACCC Executive Board meeting 15 July 2024 starting at 1800

Location AML Post 36, 1291 Oakwood Ave, Des Plaines, IL 60016

[Download agenda](#)

Next VACCC Membership meeting Shall be in 24 September 2024 starting at 19hr00 7pm Location American Legion Post 1941 [See Directions](#) 900 South La Grange Road, La Grange, IL 60525 .

[See our VACCC Membership Roster](#)

34 Voting Organizations for 2024

Thank You all who came to our membership meeting 25 June 2024

33/34 Membership organizations Attended with 52 delegates.

The Attendance was between 150-200 veterans and supporters.

[Download the MVRB Powerpoint](#)



Want to see recordings of our meetings or more information go to our temporary website vfwildist4.org and look under resources.

Comming Soon! Our own Website vaccookcounty.org



Our Upcoming VACCC Meeting 24 September 2024 Don't miss it!

Our next meeting shall be at American Legion Hall Post 1941 900 LaGrange Rd, La Grange, IL 60525@ 19hr00 please arrive early as the meeting shall start promptly. This is normal VACCC membership meeting. Highlighted is the presentation of our proposed 2025 Budget which shall be presented to the Cook County board, for approval.

Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County Office Staff

Superintendent Elizabeth D. Soto
Director of Finance Peter Bencak
Executive Assistant Venessa Meadows



Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County Elected & Appointed Officers

Voting Members

President Frank Gutierrez
Vice President William Browne
2nd Vice President Dutch DeGroot
Treasurer Robert Arciola
At Large Board Gregory Jacobs
At Large Board Wayne Kern
At Large Board John Steciw

Non Voting Appointed Members

Secretary Jim Parker
Chaplain Kevin Ake
Judge Advocate Gina A. LoGalbo
Sargent at Arms Lorenzo Fiorentino

Visit our Temporary Website vfwildist4.org
(go to resource tab)

Illinois Attorney Generals Military & Veterans Rights Bureau



**Military and Veterans Rights
Helpline at 1-800-382-3000 or
by email at MVRB@ilag.gov**

Veterans Administration Contact Number



VA's main info line 1-800-MyVA411
(800-698-2411) is never the wrong
number The number to call when you
don't know who to call.

Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County Member Organizations

American Legion Post 36
American Legion Post 104
American Legion Post 183
American Legion Post 208
American Legion Post 216
American Legion Post 335
American Legion Post 525
American Legion Post 615
American Legion Post 758
American Legion Post 806
American Legion Post 943
American Legion Post 973
American Legion Post 974
American Legion Post 1941
American Legion Post 1983
AMVETS Post 66
AMVETS Post 268
Jewish War Veterans Post 710
Marine Corps League Detachment 553
MOAA Chicago Chapter
Navy League Post 69
PVA Vaughan Chapter
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 311
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 981
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1337
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2202
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2868
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3579
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5979
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7186
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 8322
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9284
Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 10778
VVA Chapter 242



*** Per the Military Veterans Assistance Act eligible organizations can apply for VACCC membership 1 January until midnight of the last day of February. The organization must be Federally or State chartered and their Commander/President select One Primary & One Alternate Delegate. Attendance at quarterly VACCC meetings is strongly stressed.**

VETERANS ASSISTANCE COMMISSION OF COOK COUNTY®

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