



SERVING THE VETERANS OF COOK COUNTY ILLINOIS

President Frank Gutierrez
Superintendent Elizabeth D. Soto

Volume 3—December 2024



Advocating for the Veterans of Cook County

Monday, 28 October 2024 members and supporters of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County showed up at Cook County building where the Cook County Commission meets in their board room. Unfortunately, we mistook it for a regular meeting and had planned on testifying. Commissioner Daily came over and said our chance to testify was a week or so ago, which was a surprise.

Fortunately, Commissioner Daily and the other board members were kind enough to allow a limited number of us to speak. This occurred after Superintendent Soto gave a detailed budget overview. The video is available on line https://cook-county.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=4787

A special thanks to Veterans of Foreign Wars Department of Illinois Past Commander Brett Nila, VFW District 4 Commander Eric Morales among others speaking on behalf of the estimated 170,000 Veterans of Cook County (some estimates say it could be a much higher number and this does not take into account family members).

A very special thanks to all of the advocates for taking a good part of their day to come down and be part of the effort to make the VACCC a valuable resource for so many in need. Afterwards the veterans that were left gathered to take the photo above.

Presidents Message



The Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County (VACCC) continues to make remarkable strides in serving our Veteran community, thanks to the dedication of our members and the hard work of our staff. This year, we have seen unprecedented growth in our budget and staffing, which has allowed us to significantly expand the services we provide to Veterans across Cook County. While this progress is encouraging, it's clear there is still much work to be done to fully meet the needs of those we serve.

These successes are the result of your strong participation and the unwavering efforts of our office team. Your commitment has enabled us to advocate for Veterans' needs and ensure their voices are heard. I also want to thank the Cook County Commissioners for recognizing the importance of our work and standing with us to make these advancements possible. Their continued support has been a vital part of our progress, even if it hasn't completely addressed all the challenges we face.

While we haven't achieved everything we hoped for, the improvements we've seen this year are better than what we've had in the past. Challenges still exist, including ensuring consistent support and resources for our team, who often take on workloads far beyond what is expected. These issues highlight the importance of continuing our advocacy and growth.

It has truly been a pleasure working alongside the VACCC staff, members, and partners. Your dedication inspires me every day, and I look forward to what we can achieve together.

Looking ahead, I urge all members to take part in the 2025 Membership Enrollment Period from January 1 to February 28, 2025. Renewing your membership and recruiting others is essential to maintaining our momentum and strengthening our ability to serve Veterans effectively.

As I always say, *"The work we do saves lives."*

2nd Vice Presidents Message



As we write this message to you, our budget is pending and in the hands of our Commissioners. We have the minimum that we need, but unfortunately our original proposed budget had to be cut to have any budget at all.

I hear your concerns about the urgent need for helping veterans, especially those in our under served areas. We, your board and membership, shall never stop advocating for those in need.

You, the delegates and alternates for your organizations, are the heart of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County and you contribute more than you can imagine just by being involved. On 1 January there will be enrollment once again for delegates and alternates. The appointments are made by your Commander/President. We welcome new members, but ask that you be represented in person at every VACCC meeting. These are held quarterly and in a central Cook County location. New members are welcome to apply. Current members must reapply each year.

We will also be holding elections for our four officers and three at large board members. This takes place on 25 March at Hines VA auditorium. Before the meeting, we hope to have a veterans open house with vendors. The entire board is an advisory board. It is you, the membership, that vote on all matters. If anyone is interested, throw your hat in the ring. After the election the board is immediately put into service.

Vice Presidents Message



I hope everyone takes an opportunity to read the FY 25 budget for the VACCC. The VACCC has done an outstanding job with three people to help service the veterans in Cook County. Now it is time to move forward to the next step. They have hired their first veterans service officer. There has always been a need to help veterans with their benefits and claims. The FY25 budget has projected a

Veteran Service Officer Program that will be divided into all parts of Cook County. The FY 25 budget includes a transportation program that will expand to having VSOs at the Hines VA

In the outlying suburbs, there are more posts that need to become aware of the VSO program of the VACCC. The thought process would be to have the VSO staff reach out to the district commanders of the VFW, American Legion, DAV, and other service organizations to present their proposal of having more VSO's available to identify what the VACCC plans to do to reach out to more veterans.

There are still veterans that are not aware of the benefits and services available to them. VSOs can provide crucial information and assistance in navigating the often-complex systems of veteran's benefits, healthcare, and support services.

Veterans in the outlying suburbs face unique challenges and circumstances that may differ from those in urban areas. VSOs can advocate for veterans' rights and ensure that their voices are heard in local and state government. This advocacy can lead to improved policies and resources for veterans.

Treasurers Message



It's been a journey for the VACCC trying to increase the resources necessary to serve more veterans throughout Cook County. It's very nice to see improvement is taking place.

Most of you don't know this but my membership goes way back to the early 1990's when I was only a quarter a century of age! Back then the VACCC had satellite offices throughout the county, and everything seemed to be very functional.

I returned to get my degree and didn't serve the VACCC again until I was called on in 2020. A year later, I was asked and accepted to take on the roll as Vice Commander, soon after, President, and now Treasurer. Upon my return, the organization had been reduced to rubble and the VACCC was all but dissolved. It was really disturbing to everyone.

It's been very challenging at times to get where we are today. It took a lot of work, commitment, and dedication, organizing meetings, strategy, and planning went into the great rebirth of the VACCC. My role was to step into a mess, help provide leadership, continuity, cultivate change, and create. It's been a long haul, but all the work remaining steadfast and working with great individuals is finally paying off.

It's so pleasing to see such great people on our team working together to make sure the Veterans and family members in Cook County are again being respected with the quality of services necessary to provide them critical support during emergencies.

I'm so proud of the people that I've been able to work with and happy to be a big part of the VACCC rebirth! Our work is still ongoing, but I'm beginning to feel far better now than ever. Let's keep this up by remaining a member, being involved, and helping whenever you can. It takes a team effort to finish off the work remaining.

Superintendent Soto's Message



Exciting Growth and Record-Breaking Achievements at the VACCC!

The Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County (VACCC) is proud to announce a period of transformative growth and success. Since our last update, we've doubled our staff, broken historical

records, and continued to enhance our services to meet the evolving needs of our Veteran community.

Staff Expansion

In just a short time, the VACCC has increased its staff by 100%, growing from three dedicated team members to six as of November 2024. This expansion allows us to better address the needs of Veterans across Cook County.

October Milestones

We made history by hiring the VACCC's first-ever official Veteran Service Officer (VSO), Victor Somoza. Victor, an Army Veteran, brings a wealth of knowledge and experience, having served as an accredited VSO in two other VAC's before joining us. As the first VSO in Cook County's history, Victor has already begun making a significant impact, ensuring our Veterans receive the benefits and support they deserve.

Also in October, we onboarded Rajeev Samuel as the new Manager, Finance and Business Operations (formerly known as the Director of Finance). Rajeev, a former Cook County employee, possesses extensive experience in finance and budget management. His credentials as a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) further bolster the VACCC's ability to ensure fiscal responsibility while maximizing the impact of our resources.

November Additions

This November, we also welcomed Connor Intress to the team as the VACCC's Communications and Outreach Coordinator. Connor is a current Army National Guard Engineer Officer whose background combines military service and strategic communications expertise. His role is crucial in strengthening our outreach efforts and maintaining close connections with the Veteran community.

Looking ahead, the VACCC is preparing to onboard three additional staff members currently in the hiring pipeline. This strategic growth ensures our team is equipped to provide comprehensive support and resources to our Veteran community, further enhancing our capabilities.

Seamless Operations During Growth

Despite the rapid growth, the VACCC has maintained uninterrupted operations, ensuring our services remain accessible to Veterans. During the 3rd quarter alone, we accomplished the following:

- 755 calls fielded, providing guidance and support to Veterans and their families.
- 34 outreach events attended, allowing us to connect directly with the community and expand awareness of available resources.

- 737 Veterans received, demonstrating our office's ability to serve a growing number of individuals effectively.

Historic Financial Assistance Milestone

The VACCC achieved a significant milestone in August 2024, providing \$74,490.33 in financial assistance—the highest amount ever distributed in a single month. This achievement highlights our commitment to ensuring Veterans and their families have access to the resources they need to achieve stability and success.

Looking Toward the Future

The VACCC is excited about the road ahead. With an expanded and talented team, we are poised to deliver even greater support to our Veteran community. As we continue to grow, innovate, and break barriers, we remain dedicated to our mission.

Stay connected with us for updates and thank you for your continued support as we advance our mission to serve Cook County's Veteran community with excellence.

House Bill 0612 - Property Tax Exemptions for Veterans Has Been Revised

The original law in Illinois applied primarily to those with Disabilities of 70% and above. This revision (now Public Act 103-0596) accomplished 2 major revisions:

All World War II Veterans will be exempt from paying property taxes.

There is a \$250,000 EAV (Equalized Assessed Valuation) ceiling for property tax exemptions for veterans with disabilities of 70% or above. The revision clarifies the rules when a veteran's EAV exceeds that ceiling. Now, any veteran who has a Service-Connected disability of 70% or above and is living in their primary residence with an EAV above \$250,000 EAV can obtain the exemption and pay tax only on the balance of the EAV that is above \$250,000 rather than being unable to take advantage of the benefit.

Senate Bill 3479

Consumer Fraud-Veterans

Amends the Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act. In provisions concerning deceptive practices targeting veterans and military members, changes the definition of "veteran or military benefits services" to any services offered or provided to a veteran, military member, or family member who is entitled to receive benefits under federal, State, or local law, policy, or practice as a result of, at least in part, qualifying military service. Adds a veterans services disclosure to be made by any person providing veteran or military benefits services. Makes it an unlawful practice for any person providing veteran or military benefits services to fail at the outset of the business relationship to clearly provide, both orally and in writing, veterans services disclosures when veteran or military benefits services are provided in exchange for any financial compensation, benefit, or thing of value. Makes other changes.

Thank-a-Veteran Event

On the 22nd of November, the Veterans Assistance Commission worked in conjunction with both the Jesse Brown VA and the Rush Road Home Program to bring resources to veterans before the holiday season. Using locations hosted by the many Aldermanic Wards of Chicago, we managed to provide veterans with access to gift cards, hygiene kits, health services, and housing resources. These services were provided by not just the VACCC, Jesse Brown VA, and Rush Road Home Program but also the Cook County Assessor's Office, Good News Community Kitchen, and the Oral Health Forum. In particular, we wish to thank the Good News Community Kitchen and the Oral Health Forum for their support in providing hygiene/oral hygiene kits for the veterans who were most in need. Special thanks should also be given to Alderman Gardiner, Alderman Hall, Alderwoman Lee, Alderman Raymond Lopez, Alderman O'Shea, and Alderman Villegas for graciously allowing us to use their offices to host these events.

VACCC Members Honored



19 September In Peoria Illinois Association of County Veterans Associations President Andrew Tange presented the Allen J. Lynch Medal of Honor Foundation awards to VACCC member representatives Dutch DeGroot (*Veteran of the Year*) and Randall L. Tyner (*Other Not Self*).



House Passes Dole Act:

The Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act, H.R. 8371, passed in the House with a bipartisan vote of 389-9. This legislative package, known as the Dole Act, is being slated for a vote in the Senate. If signed into law, it would fund a range of enhancements vital to critical health care services for veterans and caregivers who need help now and cannot wait any longer. Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act

This bill addresses various programs, benefits, and services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), including those related to health care, educational assistance, home loans, homelessness, and disability and memorial affairs.

Among other elements, the bill

- modifies the administration of the Veterans Community Care Program, including by providing protections for care agreements between veterans and clinicians;
- increases the expenditure cap for non-institutional care alternatives to nursing home care;
- provides certain support to family caregivers under the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers;
- modifies the administration of certain educational assistance programs and benefits, including by removing the expiration on a surviving spouse's entitlement under the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship;
- expands the Native American Direct Loan program by allowing Native American veterans to refinance other existing mortgage loans on the same property if certain conditions are met;
- requires the VA to provide a burial and funeral allowance for certain veterans who die prior to October 1, 2026, in a home or other setting at which the veteran was receiving VA hospice care (if such care was directly preceded by VA hospital or nursing home care);
- temporarily increases the maximum rate of per diem payments provided by the VA to entities that furnish services and transitional housing to homeless veterans;
- authorizes a program to modernize the electronic health record and other relevant health information technology systems of the VA; and
- addresses various oversight and reporting matters.

To register for 17 December meeting
<https://signupschedule.com/dutch>

Our Website is Up and working

It has been a struggle to try and get our own website up. We have been working on this for a couple of years, and it is finally up and running. It will help the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County grow. Most of those reading this are former military and fully realize communications (commo) is vital for smooth operations.

Our leadership was in contact with the IT folks of Cook County and it just didn't see we could get a good way to manage the site through them so we decided to go on our own. Luckily, we were able to

benchmark off of what the National VFW uses with a company called Drive Path. They were kind enough to arrange a site at the same cost as that they give to VFW posts. They actually tailored a design for us. There are still a few small bugs which we are working on, but we are happy to say we have a presence on the web. Below you can see some of the features and if you feel we need to add more, we are all ears. Soon we will be expanding the services page and Veterans Service Officer page.



MEETINGS



See meeting information for Membership Meetings

The Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County is a governmental body that is subject to the Military & Veterans Assistance Act, it operates independently from the Cook County Government but the county provides support. We have quarterly meetings (unless special meetings are called) and each member organization is asked to have their delegate or alternate to register and attend. These are public meetings governed by the Open Meetings Act and anyone is welcome. Public comments are to be limited to 3 minutes. We ask our membership to be concise of time in their comments as well.

[Register Here](#)

ASSISTANCE



See what assistance we offer for our veterans community

The V.A.C. Provides Qualified Veterans With Immediate Emergency Assistance for:

Transportation (Weekly Bus Cards – CTA / PACE)
(Outpatient – CWT/School – Job Interview – Employment – Housing Search...NOT Personal Use)

Assistance with:

- Mortgage or Rent
- Utilities (Electric / Gas / Water) (Spouse & Minor Child under 18)
- Burials (Death Certificate, Funeral Invoice, Spouse or POA, Photo ID)
- Records Requests
- Referrals for VA Benefits
- Transportation
- Hygiene

Download the application that your organization leader can fill out, save, and email to us for annual membership starting on 1 January

VIDEO

See Video of our latest and past membership meetings

Our Meeting 24 September 2024



See Past meetings video of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County

To See/download Photos of the 25 June Meeting [click here](#) or image below. Thanks to Photographer Mike Zarnek 25 June 2024

Coming our veterans service officer page where you can learn about benefits you may have earned.

Our Resource Section has past board & membership minutes, annual reports, newsletters, news, video, bylaws & more

RESOURCES



Come here for all the resources you may wish. [calendar-news-annual reports- videos-past meeting minutes & more and newsletters](#) any and all documentation that one may wish to research.

NEWS



Public Notice Board Meeting

An executive meeting of the VACCC board shall meet 26 November

Membership Meeting 17 December

Please register to help us prepare

Our New Hire

Conner Inress VACCC Communications and Outreach Coordinator

See the latest news from the VACCC



Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County Membership Meeting Minutes

24 September 2024 To be voted on 17 Dec. Meeting

Location:

Robert E. Coulter Jr.
American Legion Post 1941
900 South La Grange Road,
La Grange, IL 60525

(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 1901hrs.
- b. Roll Call/Quorum – 2nd VP DeGroot announced a quorum is attending per the sign in sheet. A copy of the Sign In Sheet is attached to and a part of these Minutes.
- c. President Gutierrez introduced the following guests: Director of the Cook County Veteran affairs Committee, Deanna Love, members of the DuPage VAC, Attorney Josh Herman and 9th District Cook County Commissioner, Maggie Trevor

II. Opening Reflection – Chaplain Kevin Ale

- a. Prayer/Reflection.
- b. Posting of the Colors/Pledge of Allegiance.

III. Public Comment.

- a. Larry Nazimek asked how many organizations have applied to become State Chartered? President Gutierrez replied that he did not think there were any but he will check to confirm.

IV. Consent Agenda – President Gutierrez.

- a. Approval of Minutes of June 25, 2024 Membership Meeting. The Minutes were not read but were distributed to all members in advance of this meeting. Motion to Approve the Minutes was made by Greg Jacobs 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 \$5,028.57 as of August 31, 2024.
- b. Ratification of Certain Executive Board Actions. Tabled to next meeting.

VI. VACCC Office Reports – Superintendent Soto read the Mission Statement of the VACCC reported the following for the second quarter:

- a. Financial & Disbursement Reports, Veterans Served & Race and Gender Reports and Monthly Outreach Report are in process and as such will be tabled to the next meeting.
- b. Communications/Website Update. Superintendent Soto announced that the VACCC Website is now up and running and thanked 2nd VP DeGroot for his efforts and work with County officials to get this done.
- c. Cook County HR and Staff Hiring Update. This year's goal is to add five full time positions and Elizabeth announced that the VACCC's first full time VSO has been hired. (thunderous applause!) She asked Victor Somoza to say a few words. Victor is a native Chicagoan and Army vet who served tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was awarded the Purple Heart for combat wounds that eventually resulted in a Medical Discharge. Victor thanked Elizabeth for the opportunity to serve as a VSO for the VACCC and looks forward to serving the vets of Cook County (more applause).
- d. Goals. Superintendent Soto said among her current goals are to hire two to five new employees this quarter, including a Deputy Superintendent, an Outreach Coordinator and a person to work on Disability Claims, and to finalize the 2025 budget.

A motion to approve the Office Report was made by Greg Jacobs and duly seconded. The motion was passed by unanimous voice vote.

VII. Items for Membership Approval -- President Gutierrez

- a. Resolution 24-01 regarding 2025 Budget approval and expenditure of funds pursuant thereto was introduced by Attorney Herman who gave the members an opportunity to review and comment on it. [Copies of the Resolution were distributed prior to the meeting. There were a couple of audience questions that were answered satisfactorily. Motion to Adopt the Resolution was made by Art Ellington and duly seconded. The motion was passed by unanimous voice vote. A copy of the Resolution 24-01 attached and is posted on our web site
<https://vaccookcounty.org/default.asp?pid=32905>..

- b. Motion to Yearly Evaluation of VACCC Superintendent. [Copies of the Evaluation were distributed prior to the meeting.] Motion to Adopt Evaluation was made by Sec. Parker and duly seconded. The motion was passed by unanimous voice vote. A copy of the Evaluation attached and is posted on our web site
<https://vaccookcounty.org/default.asp?pid=32905>.

VII. Bylaws – John Steciw

a. No report. Jim Schultz asked that a copy of the current By-laws be distributed to the members and President Gutierrez agreed to do so via email. A question also was raised about emails to members who do not have computers or use email. 2ndVP DeGroot said that he will send it to such members by mail if he is provide with her/his mailing address.

VIII. Budget – 1st VP Browne

a. No report at this time as the 2025 Budget has been approved but members will have the opportunity to serve on the Budget Committee next year.

IX. Services Provided Board Member Kern

a. Wayne Kern reported that he had some discussion with Larry Nazimek about two books that explain the structure of the Illinois state government and contain information for many key officials. Wayne then introduced Larry who briefly summarized each one and described how they can be useful to our members. Both books are available online. Wayne said if Larry would send him the links he (Wayne) would arrange to have the information included in these minutes. [Secretary's Note: Larry sent the links to Wayne who passed them along to me. The book titles and links appear below.

Illinois Blue Book:

https://www.ilsos.gov/publications/illinois_bluebook/home.html

Illinois Handbook of Government:

<https://www.ilsos.gov/publications/handbook/2324handbook.pdf>

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

a. Lyons Twp. Post 1941, 6404 Joliet Road Countryside Il 60525, has agreed to this location for the December 17, 2024 (1900 hrs.) meeting.

XI. Old Business -- President Gutierrez

a. Report on the Membership Corporation. Tabled.

XII. New Business/ Additional Public Comments.– President Gutierrez.

a. Art Ellington said there is a severe shortage of Election Judges this year. He encouraged people to volunteer to help the County by performing a valuable service – and you get paid,

b. Ken McClory said that for most vets dentures and implants are not covered by the VA or SS. There is a company, Dental Services, that will do this for one-third the cost of regular dentists.

c. Chuck Bosko of AL Post 1941 said that the Post will host a Veterans Resource Fair in this build between 10am and 2pm on October 2. Lots of vendors will be there to introduce vets to their services. Elizabeth will attend on behalf of the VACCC. Medical services will be there to run tests and give flu shots. Everyone one is invited and, because it will be a free event, a full house is anticipated.

XIII. Comments from Special Guests:

a. President Gutierrez invited Commission Trevor to make a few comments. Ms. Trevor said that veterans concerns were also her concerns because her Dad was a WWII vet. She also mentioned that she represents the 9th District where (we hope) the new building in River Grove will be located. Finally, she offered her Arlington Heights office as a meeting location for the VACCC if needed.

b. President Gutierrez also invited Director Love to speak. Ms. Love said that she was very pleased that the VACCC hired VSO Somoza and is looking forward to working with the VACCC to meet the needs of veterans throughout the County.

XIIV. Presentation by VACCC Attorney Joshua Herman.

a. By way of background Mr. Herman said that he was raised in PA and after HS attended Bradley U. About that time, he signed up with the US Army reserves. Three days after graduation he was called up and deployed to Iraq. After discharge from active duty, he attended law school at IIT and U of I. After his admittance to the Bar, he joined a firm that specializes in representation units of government. His practice focuses on VACs. He is very pleased to be asked represent the VACCC. Mr. Herman then explained the need for going into Executive Session and the importance of doing so this evening. Among other things, it requires that all non-members be excused from the room. He the asked for a motion to go into Executive Session.

b. Art Ellington made a motion to go into Executive Session that was duly seconded. The motion was passed by unanimous voice vote at 1941hrs.

c. Mr. Herman explained that Executive Session is necessary for members to have a free, open and cordial discussion of topics that are sensitive.

d. A motion to close the Executive Session was made, seconded and approved by unanimous voice vote at 2020hrs.

XV. Adjournment.

President Gutierrez closed with a thank you to the Board, Members and guests for their contributions to a very productive meeting. Upon a proper Motion, duly seconded, the meeting was adjourned at 2038 hrs.

Making Progress the Staff Doubles Welcome to our VACCC Family



Introducing Rajeev Samuel as our new Manager of Finance and Business Operations at the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County (VACCC)!

Rajeev brings an impressive background in finance and budget management, along with his credentials as a Certified Public Accountant (CPA). While he is not a Veteran himself, Rajeev is eager to support our Veteran community and is excited to join our dedicated team.



Conner Intress is the VACCC's new Communications and Outreach Coordinator. His focus will be increasing the presence of the office in veteran events throughout Cook County. He has a Master's degree in Public Affairs from UW Madison, and is himself a veteran who still serves as an Engineer Officer with the Wisconsin Army National Guard. He is dedicated to ensuring the VACCC's resources reach the veterans who need it most through cooperation with electeds, non-profits, and other government organizations within the county.



Our very first Veteran Service Officer (VSO), Mr. Victor Somoza!

Victor is making history by being the first official VSO to be employed by the VACCC and Cook County! His addition marks an incredible milestone for the VACCC as we continue to expand our services and provide VA Claims Assistance to our Veteran community.

Soon, Victor will be connected to our management system and once that's complete, he will officially begin taking appointments.

However, Victor has already hit the ground running, assisting Veterans with VA claims inquiries from day one!

***Need assistance call our office!**



Our Upcoming VACCC Meeting 17 December 2024 Don't miss it!

Our next meeting shall be at Lyons Township 6404 Joliet Road Countryside, IL 60525@ 19hr00 please arrive early as the meeting will 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.

Key Legislator Veterans Advocate Honored



Senator Porfirio poses with Randall Tyner (who authored SB3479 and represents Marine Corps League Detachment 553 to the VACCC & Superintendent Elizabeth Soto

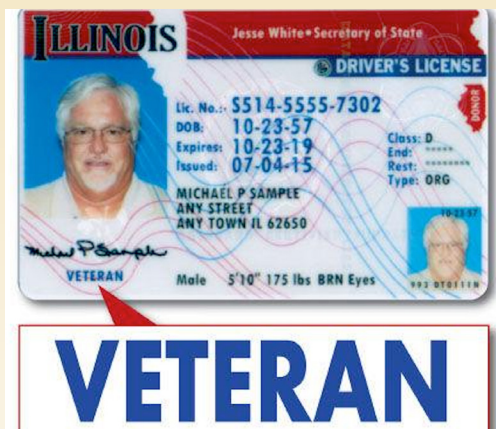
Surprising the Senator is our VACCC Secretary Jimmy “The Hammer” Parker. Jim a tireless volunteer is also very involved with the Chicago Honor Flight.

Illinois State Senator Mike Porfirio was honored with the prestigious Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions Legislator of the Year Award. although the Senator couldn't make the IACVAC meeting in September, our VAC picked up the award and surprised him. The event took place at American Legion Post 1941 (a VACCC member post).

The Senator has been instrumental in most of the veteran centric bills brought up in Springfield. Perhaps most noteworthy was SB3479 mentioned before in

our newsletter. SB3479 insures that veterans being preyed on by “Claim Sharks” can put in a complaint to the Attorney Generals Military and Veterans Rights Bureau, who in turn will hold them responsible. The bill takes effect 1 January. This June both Senator Perforio and Randall Tyner, shown in the left photo where also honored by the VFW Department of Illinois as Legislator & Civil Servant of the year in Springfield. Senator Perforio, like many of our state legislators, is a firm advocate for our VACCC family as well.

Illinois Veterans License Designation



Having your driver's license updated with your veteran status ensures you easily can get special veterans-only discounts and other benefits offered by private businesses as well as state and local governments.

Most states offer a free veteran's designation on their driver's licenses, and if you want to get your full benefits as a veteran, you will want to make sure you get yours.

For What Kind of Discounts Are Veterans Eligible?

You may have visited veterans discounts on line and have see the hundreds of discounts that businesses offer to veterans. These discounts cover almost every type of business you can imagine: from golf courses to drugstores to theme parks. However it can be cumbersome to carry your DD-214 with you all the time in order to get these discounts, and that really isn't something you should be doing.

To make it easy to get these discounts, you can apply for a veteran's ID card from the Department of Veterans Affairs, but the VA only gives this card to honorably discharged veterans, and having to carry an extra ID card with you can be a hassle. That's why it's always good to get that veteran's designation on your driver's license.

Either your VA ID card or your state-issued ID or license with a veteran designation is usually all you need to take advantage of the many discounts listed in our discounts section as well as other discounts. These “other” discounts can be extremely beneficial if you take advantage of them.



DON'T FEED THE SHARKS



DontFeedTheSharks.org

What we think a "Claim Shark" is:

- A Claim Shark is an individual or company that charges hefty fees to "assist" or "consult" veterans with filing their VA benefit claims – this practice is illegal!
- Claim Sharks are not VA accredited, meaning they aren't required to adhere to the well-established professional and ethical standards of VA accreditation, so their advice can often be misleading or even fraudulent.
- Like a "Loan Shark," once you're in, you can't get out, and may be subject to new and hidden fees whenever you get a new rating, no matter who does the work.

Some of their predatory practices are:

- Promising or guaranteeing an increased disability rating or percentage increase.
- Advertising expedited VA claims decisions.
- Requesting login credentials to access a veteran's personal information through secure VA websites like eBenefits or VA.gov.
- Using confusing tactics or ambiguous language to mislead claimants or coerce them into signing a contract.
- Telling veterans to forego VA exams and offering health consultations within their own network of doctors.

Who we think the Claim Sharks are:

- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| ✎ Trajector Medical | ✎ Veteran Care Services |
| ✎ Veteran Benefits Guide | ✎ VetComm |
| ✎ Veterans Guardian | ✎ VA Claims Academy |
| ✎ VA Claims Insider | ✎ Vet Assist |
| ✎ Telemedica | ✎ Just4Veterans |
| ✎ Patriot Angels | ✎ Veterans Disability Help |

Veterans can protect themselves by:

- Always working with VA accredited representatives.
- Attending all exams ordered by VA.
- Not signing contracts.
- Not agreeing to fees or payments from future benefits.
- Not agreeing to pay for medical consultations or opinions.
- Not providing access to Protected Health Information or Personal Identifiable Information.

**If you are a victim contact the
Military and Veterans Rights Bureau
1-800-382-3000**

MVRB@ilag.gov

www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov

Who is NOT a Claim Shark?

- VA accredited veterans service organization representatives, like the VFW
- VA accredited claims agents
- VA accredited attorneys
- Attorneys assisting with Camp LeJeune lawsuits who do not charge excessive fees

VFW
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.

(CTA) Veteran Employee Resource Group



The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) Veteran Employee Resource Group recently joined Habitat for Humanity's Veterans Build program for their fourth annual volunteer effort, focusing on supporting Veterans in need within the community. This year, the group took on the renovation of a Marine Corps Veteran's home. The project, traditionally centered on new construction, was organized this year by Joseph Dixon, Senior Manager for Facility Maintenance at CTA. A Marine Corps Veteran himself, Dixon led the effort to bring together volunteers and resources, ensuring the work was completed efficiently and with dedication.

The renovations included a full bathroom remodel, fresh tile throughout the house, a new coat of paint and trim on the exterior, two new retaining walls, and a back porch for added outdoor space. The team also handled additional landscaping tasks, trimming and removing dead trees to enhance the property's safety and appearance.

The annual Veterans Build, which takes place on Veteran's Day weekend, is just one of the many ways the CTA Veteran Employee Resource Group serves the Veteran community. Founded by Frank Gutierrez,

President of the Veteran Assistance Commission of Cook County (VACCC), the group helps CTA's Veteran employees connect with essential resources, access benefits, and prepare for career advancement. By leading initiatives like the Veterans Build, they strengthen the bonds within their team and give back to Veterans in meaningful ways.

In addition to these community service projects, CTA has made strides in hiring Veterans. Since the beginning of the year, they have welcomed 109 Veteran employees, many of whom learned about the Veteran hiring initiative through outreach by the VACCC, with support from Superintendent Elizabeth Soto. This outreach is helping Veterans transition into fulfilling careers within CTA, where their skills and experience are valued.

In the attached photo, the team stands proudly in front of the Habitat for Humanity trailer, wearing matching red shirts that read, "every Veteran deserves a decent place to live." This powerful message reflects the purpose of the Veterans Build program and highlights the CTA Veteran Employee Resource Group's commitment to uplifting the Veteran community.

Illinois I-Serve Plates



first set of plates to any U.S. Armed Forces veteran if 1) the veteran holds proof of a service-connected disability from the United States Department of Veterans' Affairs; and 2) the veteran whose degree of disability has been declared to be **50 percent or more**, but whose disability does not qualify the veteran for a plate or decal for persons with disabilities under **625 ILCS 5/3-616**.

For More information www.ilsos.gov/departments/vehicles/license_plate_guide/military/disabled_vetiserve.html

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

*Past President VACCC

Visit our Website
vaccookcounty.org

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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