VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs ★ Volume 2, Issue 1 ★ February 2022

★ Message from IDVA Acting Director Terry Prince

Welcome to Veterans Connections: News from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs. When I joined IDVA last April, I spent time meeting with the team and visiting the homes. From these conversations, I developed a Six-Point Plan for the Future of IDVA which reflected areas identified where we could do better and where we were hitting the mark. Elevating our communications stood out as a critical area for improvement. Informing veterans and partners about the happenings at IDVA, educating them about services and programs, and keeping relevant information front and center, is central to providing better service to Illinois' 600,000 veterans. We also want to hear from you about how we are doing and what you need from us. What are your questions? What is your unique situation? This newsletter is just one of our extensions to keep us better connected. Our website also has a new look and is easy to navigate. https://www2.illinois.gov/veterans/. You will find information on benefits, services, education, programs, our veterans' homes, and events.

Thank you for taking time to read our updated newsletter, and we look forward to continuing the conversation.

Terry Prince, IDVA Acting Director

National Activity Professional Week

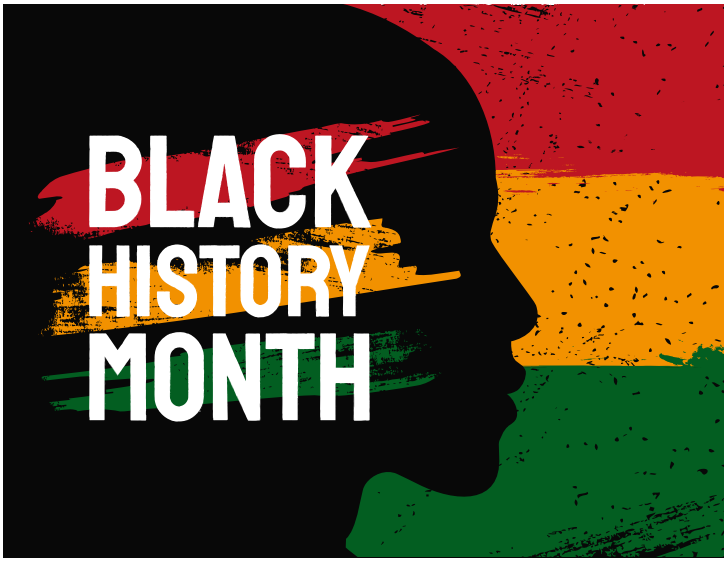
The IDVA recognizes its activity professionals for National Activity Professional Week, a time to take a moment and applaud the vitally important role that activity professionals play in the lives of veterans. All of us say "THANK YOU," for being part of the comprehensive model of care that is central to the mission of our veterans homes and for the betterment of those we are privileged to serve.

Our mission at the IDVA is very simple. To serve those who have served. In doing so, we serve not only the men and women who have worn the uniform, but also their families. It is our privilege to be able to help our veterans receive the benefits they have earned through service to our nation. Our goal is to empower our veterans and their families to thrive in all aspects of their lives.

We know there are many veterans within our great state who do not require any assistance – but we still want to encourage you to "Stand Up and Be Counted!" by registering with your local VSO. In doing so, you're helping IDVA to do a better job of planning for services, seeking federal funding and understanding the needs of our veteran communities statewide. Click here to register.

We Thank you for your service and for your sacrifice and we at the IDVA look forward to offering our services to You.

Monthly Highlights



Black History Month
February is Black History Month where we celebrate the achievements of Black Americans and recognize their central role in the history of our nation.

In his proclamation dedicating February 2022 as Black History Month, President Joe Biden said, "Each February, National Black History Month serves as both a celebration and a powerful reminder that Black history is American history, Black culture is American culture, and Black stories are essential to the ongoing story of America — our faults, our struggles, our progress, and our aspirations. Shining a light on Black history today is as important to understanding ourselves and growing stronger as a Nation as it has ever been".

Throughout the month, IDVA has featured many of our African American Veteran heroes on social media. Since the Revolutionary War, Black Americans have served and fought for freedoms – in many cases, the very freedoms which were not immediately granted to them. We are grateful for their service and honor them not just this month but throughout the year.

February 18: National Caregivers Day
National Caregivers Day is recognized on Friday, February 18, 2022. Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs employees hundreds of caregivers in its five Veterans' Homes. The healthcare professionals provide vital services to our veterans 24/7 and deliver a variety of duties including personal and medical care. The model is holistic and cares for the whole person by creating a vibrant community with a team of dedicated professionals. We are grateful for the compassion, professionalism, and commitment to bettering the days of the veterans entrusted in the care of Illinois' veterans' homes.

February 28: Desert Storm Remembrance Day
Monday, February 28, 2022, marks the 31st anniversary of the end of Operation Desert Storm. The Remembrance Day program will be held virtually with remarks offered by Governor JB Pritzker and IDVA Acting Director Terry Prince to honor those who served. Illinois was a big part of Desert Storm with ten Army, eight Navy and five Air National Guard and Reserve units from Springfield, Peoria, Chicago, Scott Air Force Base, Rock Falls, and Fort Sheridan deployed to the conflict.

695,000 U.S. service members deployed during the war and for 42 days and nights, our military, along with 38 partner nations, fought to end Iraq's seven-month occupation of Kuwait. The air campaign was the most intense in military history, utilizing state-of-the-art artillery and the 100-hour ground campaign was equally as intense. The result was a rapid and resounding victory.

While the mission was successful, nearly 400 service men and women gave their lives, including 18 Illinoisans. They made the ultimate sacrifice. Operation Desert Storm Remembrance Day is a time to pause and remember those we lost and honor those who served.

Women Veterans

Greetings Illinois' Women Veterans! IDVA is proud to announce that as we head into 2022, our Women Veteran's Program is in full swing. Please take a moment to check out our Women Veterans page on our newly designed website along with our social media platforms Facebook, and Twitter. These platforms are opportunities to connect you with women with shared experiences, challenges, and goals while highlighting programs and resources available to you. Be sure to keep an eye on our Illinois Women Veteran's Facebook page as we take time to recognize and celebrate women veterans across Illinois in honor of Women's History Month throughout March.

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/IllinoisWomenVeterans/
Twitter: https://twitter.com/ILWomenVeterans

We also invite you to participate in the Center for Women Veterans survey for those women who are NOT using your earned benefits and services. The Center for Women Veterans would love to hear why you are not using your earned VA services and/or benefits at this link: https://bddy.me/3t3Gyrc. Let this survey be your voice, it takes less than five minutes! #BringwomenVeteransHomes2VA

Education Looks Different for Everyone

The IDVA Veterans Education and Training Section (VETS) team is poised to help veterans and their families obtain earned education and training benefits. The opportunities are vast including college degree and certificate programs, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, flight training, and correspondence courses.

In this issue, we are highlighting the G.I. Bill™ and real-life stories of how Illinois veterans have redirected their lives by participating in the G.I. Bill program.

Meet Victor Fulgencio, a United States Marine Corps Veteran who is completing his second year of a five-year apprenticeship to become a journeyman pipefitter through the Pipefitters Local 597 in Mokena, Illinois. Victor, a Motor Transport operator in the Marine Corps, attributes his training and experience as a Marine with preparing him for the apprenticeship program.

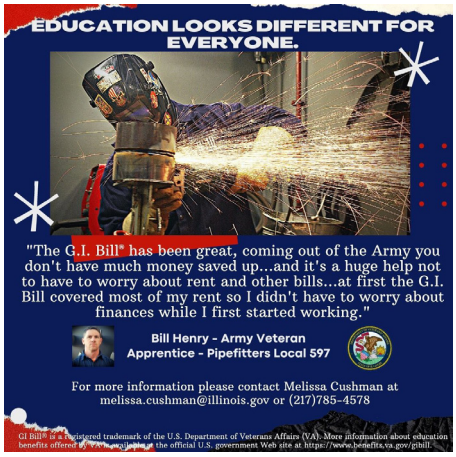
"The program is challenging. We have welding deadlines and classroom work where we learn about pipefitting," said Victor. He added, "the G.I. Bill and Housing Allowance helped me get started."

Meet Marine Corps Veteran Luke Glass who directed his G.I. Bill toward training as a maintenance mechanic with UPS. Luke trains at the Chicago-area consolidated hub, which averages 1.8 million packages a day through its facility and up to three million during the holidays. Luke's primary responsibility is to maintain the equipment that moves packages through the facility. The 48-month apprenticeship program requires both classroom and on-the-job training.

"As a maintenance mechanic, I make sure the building continues to run and gets packages out of the building to trailers in a timely manner," said Luke.

Luke attributes the G.I Bill program with helping him successfully transition from the Marine Corps to a solid civilian career.

Meet Bill Henry, a United States Army Veteran, who is finishing his second year of a five-year apprenticeship program through the Pipefitters Local 597 in Mokena, Illinois. A wheeled-vehicle mechanic in the Army, Bill attributes the G.I. Bill to helping him apply his background to a solid civilian career.



"By the time you leave the program, you will be confident in what you are doing," said Bill. "The G.I. Bill covered my early expenses, so I could save and build a nest-egg while working."

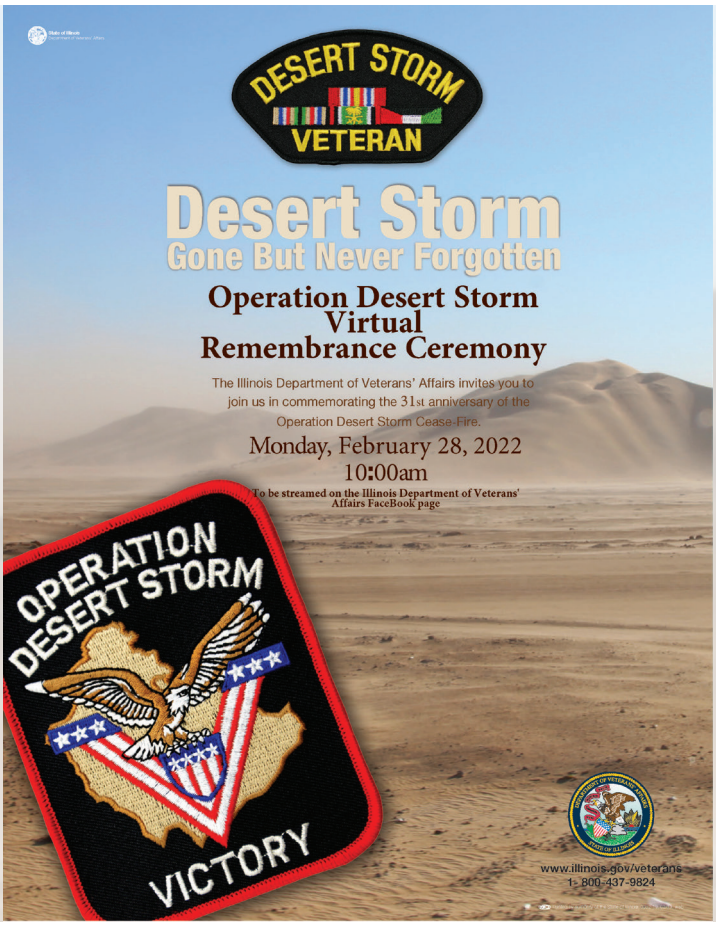
GI Bill® is a registered trademark of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). More information about education benefits offered by VA is available at the official U.S. government Web site at https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill.

Introducing IDVA University

IDVA Field Services introduces IDVA University (IDVA U), a new Veterans Service Officer Training Platform. This training is the standard for state title certification and accreditation through the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. The 12-module training program modeled around the federal VAs Training Responsibility, Involvement, and Preparation (TRIP) training program will be required by all VSOs. Each module is designed to equip VSOs with the tools, resources, and knowledge to better navigate the benefit process with veterans. The IDVA U modules are an opportunity to gain integral information for being a successful VSO. It also brings together VSOs with many years of experience and lessons learned. It is a space to collaborate, share ideas, and build relationships. Once all modules are complete and the final exam passed, a VA Form 21a will be sent to the VAs Office of General Council for accreditation, better preparing IDVA Field Services to fulfill its mission of empowering veterans and their families to thrive.

IDVA University Modules

Module 1: Introduction to the VA, IDVA and Veterans Service Organizations
Module 2: Introduction to Reference Material
Module 3: Basic State Benefits
Module 4: Introduction to Identifying the Claim, Issues, and the Development Process
Module 5: Preparing Claims and Development
Module 6: Burial Benefits and Death Claims
Module 7: Service Records, Medical Records
Module 8: Dependence Development
Module 9: Developing Pension Claims
Module 10: Special Issues Claims Development
Module 11: Award letter and Ancillary Benefits
Module 12: Appeals/Appeals Modernization Act, VSO Tools, PIV Process, and the Final Exam



Welcome Home: Veterans' Home at Chicago welcomes its first resident veterans

In a historic moment for Illinois' veterans, we welcomed the first two veterans into Illinois' fifth Veterans' Home, the Illinois Veterans' Home at Chicago. In 2008, (then) Director Tammy Duckworth first envisioned a new veteran's home in Illinois. At that time, there were over 2,000 people on the waiting lists. After many years of planning, construction, and delays, the home welcomed its first two residents on January 5th. The Chicago team is led by Administrator T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson who was instrumental in recruiting, hiring, and training staff as well as managing the final details of the home's construction and preparation for opening. The home offers space to 200 veterans and will employ up to 300 staff. While we couldn't celebrate with a large event to commemorate the day because of COVID precautions, the Chicago team welcomed them with open arms, balloons, music, and cheers. Congratulations to T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson and the entire IDVA team for a successful opening of the home. A special thanks to the staff from the four other homes who, in addition to their own jobs, provided much needed help in various departments.

An official Welcoming Event will be planned dependent upon the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, eight veterans reside in the home.

Welcome Brandi Melton: Veterans' Home at LaSalle Administrator

Brandi Melton, Administrator for the Veteran's Home at LaSalle, leads a team of 235 caring for up to 184 veterans. She joined IDVA in 2021 after serving as the administrator of the 103-bed Sunrise Skilled Nursing Home in Virden, IL. She has woven together experience in the public and private sectors, all centered around care for seniors and substance abuse rehabilitation. Her private sector roles include activities coordinator in a long-term care home where she created a vibrant community for her residents to thrive. She was also the regional operations manager for a home health care network where she oversaw the programming and compliance of five regional branches. As part of Project Jefferson, a contract with the Department of Defense, she directed the Illinois Army National Guard substance abuse and suicide prevention program and aided Commanders in engaging soldiers in substance rehabilitation.

"There is a great sense of professional satisfaction serving our nation's heroes. I love what I contribute to Veterans' lives and I enjoy having meaningful work that allows me to ensure our Veterans receive the highest standard quality of life, care, compassion, and commitment to the benefits they earned," said Brandi about her work.

She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice Studies from MacMurray College and her Master of Arts in Human Services and Social Service Administration, from the University of Illinois at Springfield, College of Human Services. She is currently working toward her Master of Arts in Public Health Administration at Benedictine University.

Thank you to Dawn Whitcomb, Adjutant at the Veterans' Home at Quincy

Dawn Whitcomb, United States Navy veteran, served at the Veterans' Home at Quincy for over 25 years. In each of her roles she has centered her energies around Quincy's veterans. She began her Quincy Home career as a Ward Clerk at Schapers Hospital as a student. She then enlisted in the Navy as a Hospital Corpsman where she served in Desert Shield/Storm and earned several military citations including the Fleet Marine Force Ribbon, Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal, Good Conduct Medal, Navy Unit Commendation, and the National Defense Service Medal.

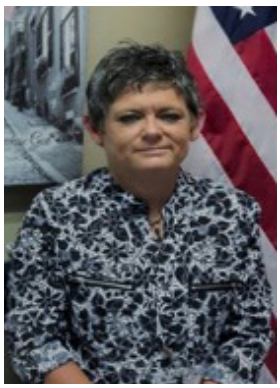
Troy Culbertson, Dawn Whitcomb, Terry Prince

Dawn returned to the Veterans' Home at Quincy as an activity therapist where she created a vibrant community for the resident veterans. She shifted roles to Reimbursement Officer with the Adjutant's Office where she was instrumental in resident admissions and for the last ten years, Dawn has served as the IVHQ Adjutant where she advocated for the home's veterans, spouses, and widows. She also supervised critical resident services and built lasting partnerships with local veteran organizations.

"Dawn's spirit and commitment to our veterans and community has contributed to the quality of care we provide, the supportive community we have built, and the robust relationships we have with our veteran partners," said Troy Culbertson, Administrator for the Veterans' Home at Quincy.

Dawn has been recognized as the IVHQ Employee of the Month and a Women of Distinction – Shining Star, "by a local media outlet. Most recently, she was awarded the IVHQ's Administrator's Impact Award and was named the home's December Employee of the Month by Administrator Troy Culbertson. Congratulations and thank you for all that you have done for veterans.

Angela Simmons: Shifting Roles to Senior Home Administrator



Angela joined IDVA in 2013 as the Nursing Home Administrator for the Veterans' Home at Anna before recently accepting the position of IDVA Senior Home Administrator, leading the team of administrators running Illinois' five nursing homes. Angie's list of achievements is noteworthy. In 2015, she won the Illinois "Pioneering Culture Change Champion of the Year" award and in 2020, was elected to the Illinois Nursing Home Administrator Board of Directors. Angie is dedicated to changing the culture of long-term care into more of a homelike "resident centered" environment. She has a history of excellence in education, presenting on person-centered care, dementia care training and disaster preparedness. Recently, she was a guest lecturer to a statewide audience on best practices for nursing homes against Covid-19.

Angie's advice to her team, "leave yesterday's problems behind. Don't bring yesterday's problems with you today, because you just doubled your problems."

Angie was raised in Southern Illinois and is the proud daughter of a Vietnam veteran. She graduated from Nursing School at Shawnee Community College in 1997 and earned her bachelor's degree at Mid-Continent University. She is committed to service in the community and volunteers much of her personal time supporting the Special Olympics.

Health and Wellness

American Heart Month

February is American Heart Month, a great time to learn and focus on cardiovascular health. According to the CDC, nearly one in two U.S. adults have hypertension yet only one in four have it under control. The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) encourages regular checkups with your providers to talk about your risks, help you learn and monitor your numbers, and create a heart health plan. Consider talking with a healthcare professional to learn more about heart health. If you have questions about your VA healthcare eligibility, please visit our website at https://www2.illinois.gov/veterans/Pages/ServiceOffices.aspx to locate your nearest Veteran Service Officer or contact USDVA Benefits and Health Care line directly at 800-698-2411.

Partner Highlight

University of Chicago

The University of Chicago's Office for Military-Affiliated Communities (OMAC) serves as the central hub of resources, support, and programming for the University's military-affiliated work. OMAC is responsible for developing and coordinating specialized programming for the University's military-affiliated community, including current and potential undergraduate, graduate, and professional studies students, alumni, faculty, staff, and all their respective families.

Dr. Terrell Odom, Navy veteran and Director of the Office for Military-Affiliated Communities at the University of Chicago, is a well-known veteran's advocate in the Illinois veteran community, and serves as the Chairman of the Advisory Council on Veterans Affairs for the City of Chicago. He develops and coordinates efforts and specialized programs for the University's military-affiliated communities and has enthusiastically partnered with the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs in community events. The University of Chicago's amazing team brings recognition to a wide range of veteran populations, ranging from the celebration of African American veterans in honor of Black History Month to highlighting the women veteran's community. Our own Acting Director, Terry Prince, had the opportunity to participate in the "Honoring the Hurt and their Heroes", hosted by the University of Chicago, to help bring awareness to service-connected injuries and the impact it has on the veteran, military families, and caregivers. IDVA is proud to call the University of Chicago a partner in strengthening the Illinois veteran community through education and resources. Please check out the University of Chicago's Office for Military-Affiliated Communities website at https://veterans.uchicago.edu/about/ to learn more about their amazing program and efforts.

Resource Corner

February is American Heart Month

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2021, April 29) February is American heart month. https://www.womenshealth.va.gov/WOMENSHEALTH/OutreachMaterials/GeneralHealthandWellness/hearthealth.asp

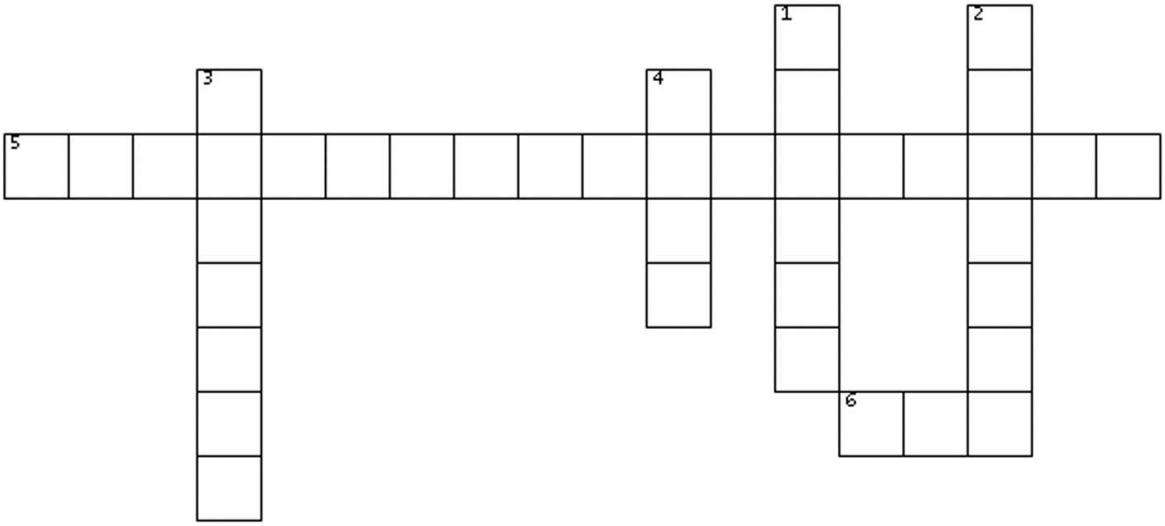
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, January 27) American heart month toolkits 2022. https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/american_heart_month.htm#:~:text=February%20is%20American%20Heart%20Month,-for%20heart%20disease%20and%20stroke.

Veterans and Higher Education

Brown, A. (2021, October 13). Veterans achieve post-service goals through UChicago education. https://college.uchicago.edu/news/student-stories/veterans-achieve-post-service-goals-through-uchicago-education

The University of Chicago. (2022). About OMAC. https://veterans.uchicago.edu/about/

Veterans Connections Crossword



ACROSS

5. The 24/7 confidential crisis support line for veterans and their loved ones at 1-800-273-8255 press 1 is commonly known as
6. Acronym for our qualified benefits specialists trained to help veterans and their families gain access to their earned benefits

DOWN

1. The last name of IDVA's current Acting Director
2. The location of the newest Illinois Veterans Home
3. A person who has served in uniform for any amount of time and in any location
4. The number of Illinois Veteran Homes

Answer Key: 1. Prince 2. Chicago 3. Veteran 4. Five 5. Veterans Crisis Line 6. VSO

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