

# Serving Illinois' Heroes

## Aspiration: Improving veterans' lives through a holistic approach

Illinois should adopt a new mentality and creative strategic approaches for veterans' services that are grounded in the principle of serving the "whole veteran"—including the veteran's family—during all stages of their lives. Veterans deserve continuity of services and care, no matter what part of the state they call home, and no matter their race, gender, or sexual orientation. This care should begin before a service member is discharged as part of comprehensive, state-led transition services.

Once home, all veterans should be connected to the benefits to which they are entitled and receive assistance navigating the many services and programs available throughout the state. This should be facilitated by trained personnel and access to an up-to-date online information portal. In addition, concerted and innovative efforts should be made to contact veterans who do not opt-in to services and programs to make sure they are aware of what is available.

As a state, we must live up to our responsibilities to provide access to quality healthcare and secure housing throughout a veteran's lifetime, ensuring that all state-run veterans' facilities are safe and meet Illinois' health code requirements. Additionally, we have a duty to create the business and economic environment for veterans to thrive—not just survive—by reducing barriers to higher education, increasing workforce development training that prepares veterans for employment in a trade, and working to eliminate veteran underemployment through paths to sustainable careers.

Realizing these aspirations would help us achieve our ultimate goal of becoming the Midwest's leader on veterans' issues, and making Illinois the best place for veterans and their families to put down roots and build their lives after serving their country.

## Illinois Today: Strong foundations but missed opportunities

Illinois has a proud history of support for those who keep our country safe. The state boasts a large community of supporters for veterans, including active duty military members, reservists, and fellow veterans. In addition to the Illinois National Guard, Illinois is home to prominent national military stations, including Naval Station Great Lakes, Scott Air Force Base, and the Rock Island Arsenal. As of Fiscal Year 2016, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimated that nearly 650,000 veterans lived in Illinois, making us one of the top ten states that veterans and their families call home.<sup>1</sup>

Illinois has many educational centers, including colleges, universities, and trade programs that are committed to welcoming veterans. The Illinois Veterans Grant program provides the state's veterans with educational opportunities beyond those provided by the federal GI Bills.

Our state has an extensive network of Veteran Service Offices through the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA), with over 60 offices at over 80 locations to help veterans obtain the benefits they have earned,<sup>2</sup> as well as multiple Veterans Assistance Commissions (VACs), which

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, "Veteran Population" (last updated Nov. 12, 2018), [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran\\_population.asp](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp).

<sup>2</sup> Ill. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, "Service Offices" (accessed Jan. 2, 2019), <https://www2.illinois.gov/veterans/pages/serviceoffices.aspx>.

are distinct units of local government established under the Military Veterans Assistance Act and funded by counties throughout the state.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there is a strong state library system that can serve as a hub and facilitator of veterans programs in communities throughout Illinois.

Illinois offers a number of benefits to veterans to show our gratitude for their service and improve their quality of life, including a veteran's designation on Illinois drivers licenses and license plates; free hunting, fishing, and camping licenses; and property tax exemptions for disabled veterans. The State of Illinois also has a set-aside program with the goal of having at least three percent of the government's contracts awarded to veteran-owned businesses.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the resources offered by the state, there are many innovative private and nonprofit organizations located throughout Illinois that are devoted to serving veterans and providing them with dignity, care, and upward mobility.

Despite these strengths, Illinois veterans still face a number of significant barriers. Although there are many public and private resources and services available in Illinois, they are not effectively communicated to the veteran community and are thus underutilized. Departments and services are operated in silos—many veterans are unaware that they exist, and even those that do are frustrated by the number of hurdles that must be cleared to have all of their needs addressed.

Additionally, Illinois has fallen short in seeking federal funds to assist veterans, potentially leaving millions of dollars on the table every year. Indeed, we rank second to last in the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs list of states by veteran compensation and pension expenditures per capita.<sup>5</sup>

Some of these challenges have been caused by failures of the government to protect our veterans' interests. For instance, construction of a new VA home in Chicago was delayed over three years due to the state budget impasse, despite being two-thirds funded by the federal government.<sup>6</sup> Even more concerning, the tragic deaths of fourteen veterans living in the Quincy veterans' home were met with continued mismanagement and a failure to act with urgency.<sup>7</sup> Our state can, and must, do better.

Unnavigable bureaucracy, coupled with high-profile cases of failing our veterans, has left the community lacking trust and looking for leadership. The new administration has an opportunity to help right these wrongs and recommit the government to better serving our veterans. More importantly, however, it has the opportunity to restore trust with our community's veterans and their families, who should never have to experience such disappointment from the democratic institutions they fought to protect.

## Key Issues for Illinois' Veterans

Veterans face many overlapping and interconnected challenges. The new administration has the opportunity to address these concerns and should focus on the following critical issue areas:

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<sup>3</sup> 330 ILCS 45/0.01 *et seq.*

<sup>4</sup> 30 ILCS 500/45-57.

<sup>5</sup> Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures for Fiscal Year 2017, the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, Department of Veterans Affairs.

<sup>6</sup> "Dunning Veterans Home To Open in 2019 More Than 3 Years Late, Rauner Says," DNA Info (Feb. 15, 2017), <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20170215/dunning/dunning-veterans-home-open-2019-more-than-2-years-late-rauner-says/>.

<sup>7</sup> See "Lawsuit Alleges State Was Negligent in Veteran's Death After Outbreak of Legionnaires' Disease," Chi. Trib. (July 20, 2018), <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-met-quincy-veterans-home-legionnaires-complaint-20180720-story.html>.

## Theme 1: Redefining the role of the IDVA

The role of the IDVA should be redefined and modernized to best serve today's veterans, who have a wide and diverse array of backgrounds and needs. Over the past two decades, the IDVA has lost the trust of veterans and those who care for them for reasons both within and beyond the agency's control, including budget constraints and the budget impasse, excessive bureaucracy, ineffectiveness, lack of transparency, and scandal. While some of these issues cannot be changed by the IDVA or the executive branch alone, there are a number of reforms that can be undertaken to begin the process of earning back veterans' trust and transforming the agency into a proactive and dynamic champion for Illinois veterans.

Immediate recommendations include:

- Charging the IDVA with the mission of being a proactive and dynamic convener of information and organizations.
- Establish the Director of the IDVA as not only an institutional leader, but also as a spokesperson and voice for veterans throughout the state.
- Use properly collected state-level data to drive decision-making, and when appropriate, establish data-sharing practices with local government entities and other organizations that work in tandem with the state to serve veterans. Make appropriate data publicly available via accessible online tools while preserving the privacy of veterans' information.
- Improve the state online portal so it is a "one-stop-shop" of all information veterans need.

## Theme 2: Augmenting service coordination and delivery

Service coordination and delivery is the lynchpin of veterans' care, and any one missed connection can cause cascading effects for veterans across the state. One critical issue is the lack of communication between the IDVA, the county VACs, and veterans service organizations, and other state agencies, all of which provide services to veterans. Not only does the work being done in these silos need to end, but Illinois veterans desperately need one, centralized online portal to access up-to-date information on the services, care, and programs that are available in Illinois. The IDVA also should be able to effectively use social media as a communication tool to reach veterans in real time without unnecessary bureaucratic constraints.

To complement information available online, the IDVA should prioritize case management to connect veterans to services related education, employment and learning to market skills gained in the military, healthcare, housing, childcare services, custody assistance that prioritizes family reunification, disputing incorrect claims, and other needs. Case managers should be trained to recognize signs of distress, including risk of suicide, and informed of how to help in crisis situations. They can also be resources for the IDVA to gain greater understanding of the everyday issues veterans are facing and increase the state's responsiveness.

To further improve coordination of services, the IDVA can designate liaisons to help eliminate government silos and work across state agencies to coordinate services for veterans related to employment, licensure and credentialing, healthcare, housing, and education. The IDVA should also conduct a statewide service assessment to identify clusters of veterans who do not have access to services within an hour's drive in order to better understand how to optimize service delivery.

As much as we need to improve coordination within the state, the new administration should also prioritize working with our federal partners to bring funds back to Illinois. We currently rank 52 out of 53 states and territories for per capita compensation for veterans' issues from the federal government, which means we're potentially leaving millions of dollars on the table every year.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the state should designate a federal liaison role within the IDVA in charge of working with federal partners on new funding and program opportunities.

As the new administration considers improvement to service coordination and delivery, there are three important sub-categories that should also be included:

*Transition services:* When service members return home, there is a significant lack of planning and coordination on the state's part to re-orient them to civilian life and take into account the variety of challenges returning service members face, including continuing their education, finding a job and building a career, reintegrating with partners and children, securing housing, and managing their physical and mental health. The state has an important role to play in both delivering some of these services and facilitating access to other existing services and programs, first when a service member initially returns home, but also later as they transition through different stages of their lives.

Currently, the state does not have a reliable way to contact returning service members. The new administration should coordinate with federal partners to work with the Department of Defense to receive contact information for returning service members sooner, ideally ninety days prior to discharge. This information should include emails and phone numbers, not home addresses, which are often inaccurate.

The IDVA should also be a resource for the families of veterans and be able to direct family members to programs and organizations that support them through the transition that they undergo when their veteran returns home.

*Health care:* The state's role in providing access to healthcare is primarily as a facilitator. Federally accredited and state trained Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) located throughout the state assist veterans in filing claims for federal benefits, which include health insurance and access to healthcare at VA hospitals. However, there are major disparities between access to care in rural versus urban parts of the state, and many existing services in central and southern Illinois are not strategically co-located with veterans. There are additional transportation challenges that impede access to care and discourage veterans from seeking it in the first place.

Actions by the new administration can include: seeking federal funding to increase the number of VSOs in the state to better serve veterans regionally; expanding the use of telehealth through existing federal programs that provide internet tablets to veterans, and working with federal partners to increase medical reimbursement rates to allow veterans access to civilian healthcare, which is sometimes closer to where veterans live.

Suicide is also a serious concern for veterans. Veterans are twice as likely to die of suicide compared to non-veterans, with female veterans dying by suicide at six times the rate of female non-veterans.<sup>9</sup> This issue continues at varying rates long after veterans return home and is known to spike at different junctures for men and for women. Understanding that veteran suicide is a

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<sup>8</sup> Id. at n.5.

<sup>9</sup> Illinois General Assembly Veteran Suicide Task Force Final Report at 12 (Dec. 1, 2016), available at [http://www.ildistrict84.com/uploads/6/7/1/1/6711327/final\\_report\\_vst\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.ildistrict84.com/uploads/6/7/1/1/6711327/final_report_vst_pdf.pdf).

complex issue with no easy answers, it is imperative that Illinois take a proactive approach, grounded in empathy and raising public awareness, that works to show our veterans that they are not alone and provide them with the help they need.

*Housing:* All veterans deserve to live in safe and secure permanent housing. This means eliminating veteran homelessness and completing construction of the Chicago Dunning Veterans' Home. The state should also expand permanent supportive housing with a greater focus on keeping families together, and make sure veterans know how to access these and other housing assistance options. It is equally important to support veterans' long-term financial health by creating pathways to home ownership.

Finally, the new administration should take responsibility for ensuring that all state-run veterans' facilities are up to code and safe for residents so that these veterans can live happy and fulfilled lives there without relatives fearing for their wellbeing. To do so, the state should assess the health and safety of current state-run veteran's facilities and determine a timely remediation plan.

### Theme 3: Creating and supporting economic opportunity for veterans

Creating and supporting economic opportunity for veterans is one of the most important ways we have to welcome veterans home and reintegrate them into civilian life. The new administration's goal should be to make Illinois a top-ranking choice for veterans to gain additional education, learn trades, start careers, and build businesses. Right now, there are barriers in place that hamper veterans' economic potential, such as a difficult-to-navigate college credit system that has different rules at each state university or community college; workforce development training that does not always strategically align with growing and/or sustainable industries that have permanence and longevity; and limited resources for veteran entrepreneurs. Reducing these barriers and creating opportunities for veterans to mentor, support, and hire other veterans should be top priorities going forward.

To increase educational opportunities, the new administration should work with state universities to strengthen the Illinois Veteran Grant and explore ways for veterans to share the benefits of the grant with dependents. The administration should also work with state universities, community colleges, the Board of Higher Education, and the Illinois Community College Board to transfer military experience to college credit consistently across institutions. Additionally, the state should work with post-secondary institutions to offer programs for graduating veterans on what to expect post-college.

To improve employment outcomes for veterans and decrease veteran under-employment, the IDVA should work with employers to create pipelines to key industries with sustainable jobs that can grow into careers. These include the building trades, manufacturing, logistics, cannabis, clean energy, and agriculture. Workforce development opportunities should be brought to Illinois, including ones that receive federal support, and the state should work with employers to educate them on the benefits—financial and otherwise—of hiring veterans. The state should also promote existing programs that fast-track licenses and certifications for CNAs, EMRs, EMTs, CDLs, state police, and firefighters and track how many veterans take advantage of these options.

Illinois should encourage veteran entrepreneurship by revisiting the state procurement goals for hiring veterans to narrow exemptions, including for professional services, and hold Chief Procurement Officers accountable for these requirements, including through ending the overuse of emergency procurements. The IDVA can also encourage entrepreneurship by promoting small

business incubators and connecting veteran business owners to each other and to aspiring veteran entrepreneurs.

#### Theme 4: Thoughtfully supporting historically underserved veterans

Supporting historically underserved veterans should be a core mission for the new administration. Underserved veterans include minority, women, and LGBTQ veterans, undocumented veterans, incarcerated veterans, and veterans with an Other than Honorable discharge. Minority, women, and LGBTQ veterans are more likely to experience discriminatory violence, trauma, and military sexual trauma, which subsequently contributes to behavior that leads to receiving an Other than Honorable discharge, substance use, job loss, homelessness, and incarceration.

A service member can be discharged with an Other than Honorable discharge, otherwise known as having "bad paper," for a wide range of behavior, including assault and felonies, but also DUI's, drug use, identifying as LGBTQ under Don't Ask Don't Tell, and even mental trauma from being the victim of a sexual assault.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the crime, once a veteran has "bad paper," they are permanently cut off from the benefits and services to which other veterans are entitled. The only recourse they have is to request and be granted an upgrade to their discharge status, which is a challenging legal process. The result is that people suffer for decades from both stigma and lack of services because of personal identities that have no bearing on their professional conduct or decisions they made in their youth that are often linked to PTSD, traumatic brain injury, or military sexual assault. Furthermore, we know that minority veterans are more likely to receive less than honorable discharges, and veterans with bad paper are at higher risk for homelessness and suicide.<sup>11</sup> Under the Illinois Human Rights Act, Illinois is one of the few states that has prohibited by law hiring discrimination based on military discharge status.<sup>12</sup> However, this alone does not address the root causes for these individuals.

To ensure the dignity of all of our state's veterans, Illinois should assist qualifying veterans to upgrade their discharge statuses and act boldly to provide vital services to all veterans, regardless of discharge status. The new administration should establish a program with the Attorney General's office in conjunction with programs at Illinois law schools to assist veterans looking to upgrade their discharge status. Additionally, Illinois should consider becoming the first state after Connecticut to adopt a trailblazing program in which veterans whose other than honorable discharge is linked to PTSD, brain injury, or sexual assault would newly qualify for state health care and benefits, including tuition to state schools.<sup>13</sup> Not only would adopting such a program dramatically impact the lives of veterans whose bad paper can be linked to experiencing prior trauma, but it would signal that Illinois is taking a national leadership role on veterans issues. Along these lines, the state should also consider allowing veterans with other than honorable

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<sup>10</sup> "What Happens When a Veteran's Discharge is Less than Honorable?", Nat'l Veterans Foundation (Jan. 25, 2017), <https://nvf.org/less-than-honorable-discharge/> (citing that, although the military has recently implemented reforms, "[o]ver a period of years, male and female victims of MST (military sexual trauma) have received Other than Honorable discharges or diagnoses of mental illness.").

<sup>11</sup> "How to Find an Ex-Military Discharge Status," Houston Chron. (June 29, 2018), <https://work.chron.com/exmilitary-discharge-status-20063.html>; "Bad Discharges=Homeless Veterans?", San Diego Union-Trib. (Aug. 26, 2015), <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/military/sdut-homeless-veterans-discharge-study-2015aug26-story.html> ("Among VA patients who served in Iraq or Afghanistan between 2001 and 2011, 5.6% were discharged for misconduct. Yet these patients accounted for 28.1% of veterans who had been homeless within their first year out of the military, the analysis found.").

<sup>12</sup> 775 ILCS 5/1-101 *et seq.*

<sup>13</sup> See Connecticut Public Act 18-47, *available at* <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2018/act/pa/pdf/2018PA-00047-R00SB-00284-PA.pdf>.



discharges to become VSOs, which would increase employment opportunities for veterans with bad paper and allow them to be a greater part of the larger veterans' community.

Other veteran populations also need assistance. Undocumented veterans should receive help gaining citizenship because no person who has served our country in the military should ever be deported. Illinois should continue to strengthen protections for undocumented residents as a welcoming state, and the new administration should work with our federal partners to achieve comprehensive immigration reform.

Incarcerated veterans are also historically underserved. Veterans who are transitioning out of prison become eligible for their benefits upon release but often need help applying for them during the re-entry process. Case managers are needed to coordinate incarcerated veteran reentry and mental health services with parole officers, the IDVA, VSOs, and social service organizations to put these veterans on a good path and prevent recidivism.

Women and LGBTQ veterans face unique challenges related to being accepted, respected, and valued by the veteran community and at veteran events. This ostracization can compound other underlying issues and lead these veterans to experience depression or harm themselves. The new administration has an opportunity to highlight these individuals and let their stories be heard as equally deserving of our state's recognition and gratitude. The state should also strengthen VSO recruitment and training to reflect the diversity of the veteran population they serve and improve interactions.

### Conclusion: Setting veterans up for success

Illinois veterans deserve the best from us, and we have outlined recommendations that we believe would make Illinois' veterans services among the highest quality in the nation. In particular, we have identified the following areas as urgent priorities:

- Improve information-sharing with veterans via VSOs, case managers, and better online resources.
- Create better economic opportunities for veterans by increasing access to education, workforce development, and building pipelines to sustainable jobs.
- Prioritize extending vital services to all historically underserved veterans.

Taken together, these actions will make Illinois an ideal home for returning service members to come back to and build healthy and happy lives with their families.