State of Illinois
Department of Veterans' Affairs

FY2020

ANNUAL REPORT

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5 ILCS 410/20

Sec. 20. Reports. State agencies shall collect, classify, maintain, and report all information required by this Act on a fiscal year basis. Agencies shall file, as public information and by January 1, 1993 and each year thereafter, a copy of all reports required by this Act with the Office of the Secretary of State, and shall submit an annual report to the Governor.

DIRECTOR LETTER



The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs would like to present the Fiscal Year 2020 Illinois Veterans Advisory Council Annual Report. At the beginning of the 2018 Fiscal Year the Discharged Servicemembers Task Force was sunset and the Annual Reporting was tasked to the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council.

To better serve our veterans, key initiatives have been discussed and acted upon throughout the quarterly meetings that were held. The appointed members of the council have dedicated hours and resources to ensure the most relevant and timely issues facing veterans have been explored and addressed.

The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, in conjunction with the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council, works diligently to investigate the re-entry process for servicemembers who return to civilian life after being engaged in an active theatre.

Linda Chapa LaVia

Director



HISTORY OF THE ILLINOIS VETERANS ADVISORY COUNCIL

Pursuant to Public Act 100-10, effective June 30, 2017, the State of Illinois created the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council (IVAC). The mission of IVAC is to investigate the re-entry process for service members who return to civilian life after being engaged in an active theatre. The investigation shall include the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, homelessness, disabilities, and other issues the council finds relevant to the re-entry process. To accomplish the mission IVAC has convened teams of experienced, professional veteran advocates, and community leaders to analyze major issue areas and develop strategic policy recommendations. IVAC's strategic policy recommendations are published annually in the IVAC Annual Report. In accordance with the Act, IVAC members include:

- Four members of the General Assembly appointed one each by the President of the Senate, the Minority Leader of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives
- Six veterans appointed by the Director of Veterans' Affairs
- One veteran appointed by the commander or president of each veterans service organization that is chartered by the federal government and by the State of Illinois and elects to appoint a member
- One person appointed by the Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard
- One person appointed by the Illinois Attorney General
- One person appointed by the Illinois Secretary of State
- One person appointed by the Director of the Illinois Department of Employment Security
- One person appointed by each military family organization that is chartered by the federal government



ILLINOIS VETERANS' ADVISORY COUNCIL
(FY 2019)

Myron Kirby, *Chairman, American Legion Representative*

Michael Peck, *Vice Chairman, Military Order of the World Wars*

GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

The Honorable Toi W. Hutchinson, *Illinois State Senator*
The Honorable Sue Rezin, *Illinois State Senator*
The Honorable Dan Swanson, *Illinois State Representative*
The Honorable Lance Yednock, *Illinois State Representative*

EXTERNAL AGENCY APPOINTEES

Brig. General Richard Neely, *Illinois National Guard*
Tom Banning, *Office of the Attorney General*
Gregory J. Curran, *Office of the Secretary of State*
Jorge Eric Bermudez, *IL Department of Employment Security*

DIRECTOR'S APPOINTEES

Bill Wolff, *Veteran Advocate*
Quinn Triplett, *Veteran Advocate*
Anthony Ortiz, *Veteran Advocate*
Ariel Shivers-McGrew, *Veteran Advocate*
Clayton Young, *Veteran Advocate*
Megan Everett, *Veteran Advocate*

VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Keith Witherell, *AMVETS*
Maureen Cattani, *Blue Star Mothers of America*
Pat Noel, *Catholic War Veterans*
Al Reynolds, *Disabled American Veterans*
Stanley Olenjack, *Marine Corps League*
Joe Schaler, *Military Order of the Purple Heart*
Louis Meyers, *Reserve Officers' Association*
Steve Fixler, *Veterans Assistance Commission*
Vince Long, *Veterans of Foreign Wars*
Roy L. Dolgos, *Vietnam Veterans' of America*
Dr. Jerry Fields, *Jewish War Veterans*
Bob Tyler, *Military Officers Association of America*
Crystal Womack, *Illinois Veterans' Advisory Council, Secretary*

RECOMMENDED FISCAL YEAR 2020 LEGISLATIVE SUPPORT

Full Funding of VA
Improve Veterans Caregiver Benefits
Increase Support for Employers of Guard and Reserve
Urge reinstate of the 48 hour review of VA Claims by VASO's

SB 110 - Surviving Spouse Amendment to the Disable Veterans Homestead Exemption

SB1255 - Transfer of State Veterans Education Benefits

SB2293 - Admission to Veterans Home for Retired Guard/Reserve Members

SB3761 - Recruiter Access to Schools and ASVAB Testing

HB5422 - Guard/Reserve Tax Credit for Employers

MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

From October 2017 to November 2018, more than 6,000 veterans died as a result of suicide nationwide. Moreover, Illinois had 162 veteran suicides in 2016. The rate at which women choose to end their own life is 180 percent higher than members of the same gender who never served. Male veterans, meanwhile, are 140 percent more likely to commit suicide than their peers who have only known civilian life. During those time periods there is no record of even one committee hearing or bill that addresses veteran suicide on the state level. Only 30% of those taking their lives everyday receive healthcare from the VA. Creating legislation that aims to partner the VA, IDVA, and outside agencies to work together to provide resources for suicide prevention to those remaining 70%. Furthermore, ensuring the 30% utilizing the VA system are properly educated on suicide prevention services.

WOMEN VETERANS

Two issues that negatively affect the woman veteran experience and contribute to a rise in suicide rates: military sexual trauma and domestic violence. Some studies suggest 1 in 4 women vets will experience military sexual trauma while serving this country. Moreover, studies suggest 1 in 3 women vets experience a domestic violence incident during their tours of duty. The female vets that are exposed, to these tragic events, carry those after affects with them when they transition into the civilian world. Legislation to educate and help these heroes heal and transition should be a top priority for our state.



TRANSITIONING VETERANS

The main objective would be to provide better information regarding Illinois' resources available to veterans and their families as they transition from active duty to civilian life. Such as, improvements with the communication between the military and the IDVA, to include providing a list to the IDVA of service members who are transitioning so a contact can be established. Create a statewide Transition Assistance Program to assist in a seamless integration to civilian life. Providing an informational portal where service and contact information is categorized. To include, available support groups, information on transitioning from military to school and school to work force, and veteran entrepreneurship programs. Moreover, provide visibility for veterans who have success reintegrating.

HOMELESS VETERANS

On any given day there are over a thousand homeless veterans in the state of Illinois. Most homeless veterans suffer from substance abuse, poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing. Veterans often suffer residual effects from their service that prevent them to properly integrate to society. As a result, many turn to substance abuse to mitigate their suffering. Prioritizing services, such as job retention, job placement, substance abuse counseling, support groups, proper housing, and transition services should be a legislative priority for 2021.

UNDERSERVED VETERANS

Whereas minority, incarcerated, LGBQT, disabled, and undocumented resident veterans are often forgot about when veterans' issues are discussed and implemented. These veterans often face a different set of issues and problems and should not be underserved. Advocacy for these veterans in the form of visibility to their issues and addressing their needs should be prioritized. Establish an IDVA committee on equality and inclusion to assist in navigating these issues should be a priority.

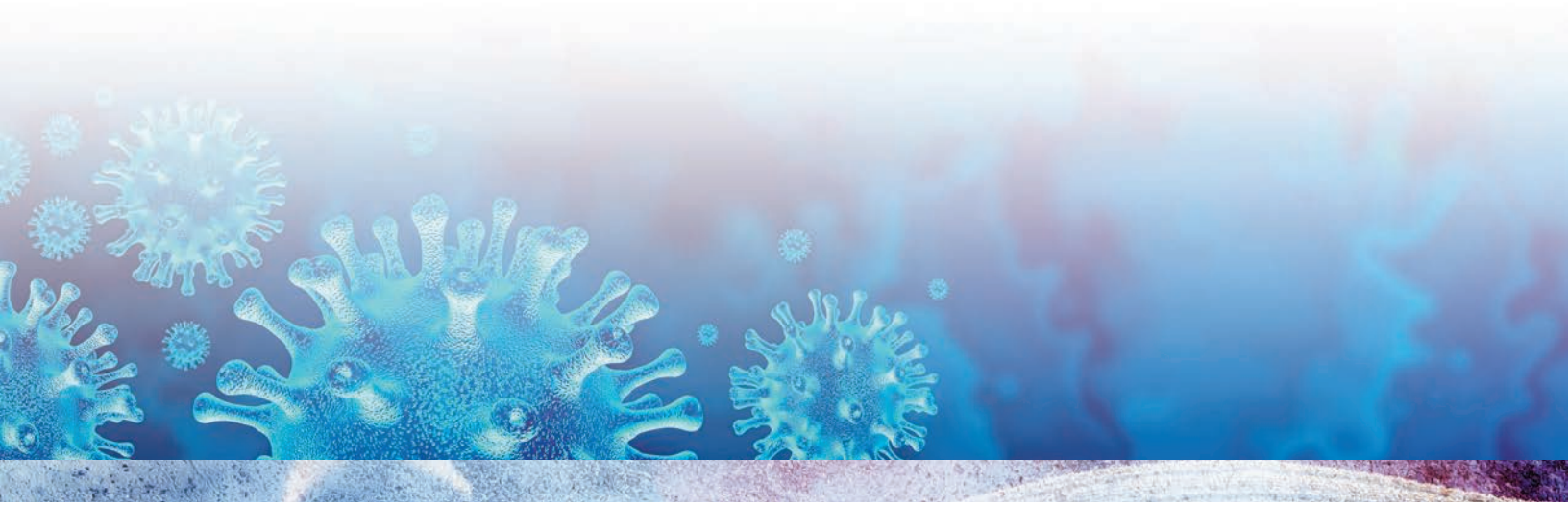


VETERAN UNEMPLOYMENT

Whereas the veteran unemployment rate is actually lower than the national average, 48% of vets leave their jobs within the first year. Positions are too often low skilled and low paid jobs that do not utilize a vet's skills or properly compensate them for their skills. Businesses hire based on skill and experience and often misunderstand a veterans' skill set or experience from working in the military. Prioritize a way to help the veteran translate their skills for civilian employers and concurrently educating employers on veteran experience and the benefit of hiring veterans.

COVID-19 EFFECTED BUSINESS

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic has decimated some businesses in Illinois and veteran owned businesses were not immune. Action can be done to ease the burden such as create a veteran owned business registration where anyone can find centralized information on how to support and patronize vet owned businesses. Furthermore, provide tax incentives and financial assistance (grants and low interest loans) to help these veteran owned businesses reopen and not relocate out of state or close down for good.



CONCLUSION

This past year has seen great reliance on our citizen soldiers to provide needed assistance during the pandemic national emergency and during the civil unrest. We urge the General Assembly to pass legislation that will provide assistance to the employers of our guard and reserve members. The stress placed on the guardsman, the families, the employers and their communities has strained their resources. Legislation to offer a tax credit to the employers is just a start. We also recognized that the ranks of the guard and reserve need to be replenished and the legislation to ensure access to our schools by the recruiters and the ability to take the Armed Forces Basic Aptitude Test in their school is again a first step. The ability of veterans to transfer to their children their state education benefits is needed to keep our students in Illinois.

Illinois is making great progress with our core mission of providing for homeless veterans with Lake County and Rockford being recognized by HUD as zero homeless veteran. But again, this is a start and we must continue the effort. We urge that the General Assembly review our recommendations on women veteran, Transition program and incarcerated veterans. Our recommendation on Suicide and PTSD to ensure that all IDVA Service Officers receive training in recognizing and referring veterans who need help will allow veterans to recognize that help is available.



For more information about the Department's programs and services, please contact:

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