



VETERANS CONNECTIONS

News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 4, Issue 12 ★ December 2024



★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

Happy Holidays!

Over the year, I have constantly referenced IDVA's three pillars: People, Operational Excellence, and the Veteran Experience. What is behind operational excellence and the veteran experience? IDVA's people. Each person contributes their talent, skills, and dedication to ensuring we provide a stellar veteran experience in our homes, veteran service offices, and headquarters buildings. We spend much time visiting our five veterans' homes and witnessing the care delivered with compassion and skill. In our Veteran Service Offices, our veterans may be busy troubleshooting an especially challenging claim or connecting a veteran with health care. I looked back at the year as we applauded the Homes' dietary, activity, engineers, housekeeping staff, CNAs, nurses, doctors, and administrators. They are synchronized so that we are caring for the whole person. The bottom line is it's personal to them because they vow to take care of "their veterans"

The Veteran Service Officers deploy across the state to meet veterans to ensure they know we are here for them. We recognized VSOs for their years of service up to 30 years. Now that's commitment! Our education team had a record number of students placed, and they partnered with the Military Order of the Purple Heart to recognize the 2024 Student Veteran of the Year. Our Gold Star family program offers opportunities for fellowship throughout the year and is administered with care and compassion. Women veterans are given a space to connect through our Women Veterans Program. Working with our dedicated partners in federal, state, and local governments, Illinois Joining Forces, and countless public and private partners, we are achieving our mission of ensuring that veterans thrive in Illinois. You should be extremely confident that Illinois' veterans are in good hands with IDVA. As you read on, you will see their hard work in action.

Thank you for staying connected to IDVA, and I look forward to even bigger things in 2025.

Sincerely,

Terry Prince, U.S. Navy Veteran and IDVA Director



Gold Star Christmas Tree Lighting

Gold Star families gathered at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum for the annual lighting of the Gold Star Tree honoring 350 Illinois heroes who gave their lives in combat. Their names are each etched on an ornament and hung on the tree to remind us of their courage and sacrifice to protect our freedoms and nation. The Gold Star is specific to those who served bravely and lost their life in combat. The symbol began during World War I when families hung banners with blue stars representing family members in the services. The family changed the blue star to gold if the service member died in combat.



Gold Star Families surround the Gold Star Tree at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

Left to right: Illinois Adjutant General–Major General Rodney Boyd, Marilyn Smith, Seeley Smith, Sheila Tracy, Gay Eisenhower, Bill & Nancy Dusenberry, Sue Wieczorek, IDVA Director Terry Prince, Brett Young & Sister, Michael Sullivan, Tonya Cummins & family, Phillipa Porter

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Pearl Harbor



Director Prince joined the American Legion Franklin D. Roosevelt Post 923 for the 83rd Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day. Participants included World War II Veteran Tony Hernandez, Japan Consulate General Yanagi Jun, Philippines Consulate General Rayan Gener, and Captain Chris Zebrowski, Marine Air Control Group - 48, Great Lakes. The program emphasized the strong partnership of the United States and Japan while honoring those who lost their lives or have been forever impacted by Pearl Harbor.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Wreaths Across America

This year, National Wreaths Across America Day was on Saturday, December 13. More than two million volunteers and supporters gathered at more than 4,600 participating locations in all 50 states, at sea, and abroad. When each wreath is placed the servicemember's name is said out loud, ensuring their memory lives on.



Mound City National Cemetery



*Senior Home Administrator Angela Simmons
at Mound City National Cemetery.*



Illinois Veterans Advisory Council Elections

The Illinois Veterans Advisory Council, established in 2004 to counsel and support the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, elected new officers for two-year terms. Robert "Bob" Tyler of the Military Order Association of America was elected chair and Shannon Yount of the Illinois Office of the Attorney General was elected co-chair. Keith Wetherell completed his two-year term as chairman and Bob Tyler was elevated to chair from co-chair.

"We are grateful for Keith's vision and leadership over the past two years," said Director Prince. "This committee is a guiding force for IDVA and we appreciate their insights, perspective, and support. "

The IVAC meets quarterly to advise IDVA regarding statutory duties, review and study issues and concerns of Illinois veterans, and keep apprised of the activities of IDVA. IVAC submits an annual report to the Governor and General Assembly describing the issues and actions taken by the council and recommendations for future action.

Members

Senator Mike Porfirio
Senator Craig Wilcox
Representative Lance Yednock
Representative Dan Swanson
Bill Wolff
Robert Norman
Kevin Wathen
Frank Gutierrez
Vince Long
Shannon Yount
Jorge Bermudez

Securities

Al Reynolds
Bruce Blackmer
Michael P. Peck
Joseph Bartley
Peggy Arick
Tim Kennedy
Dr. Jerry Field
Lee Lopez
Ray Dieter
Christa Hammers

Commissions

John "Dutch" DeGroot
Roy Dolgos
Robert "Bob" Tyler

Alternates

Greg Padovani
Art Dutkovic
Jay Davis
Hugh Shown
George Mulvaney
Elizabeth Roxworthy

Appointed By

President of the Senate
Minority Leader of the Senate
Speaker of the House
Minority Leader of the House
IDVA Director Appointee
IDVA Director Appointee
IDVA Director Appointee
IDVA Director Appointee
IDVA Director Appointee
Office of the Attorney General
Illinois Department of Employment

Disabled Veterans of America
Marine Corps League
American Legion
AMVETS
Blue Star Mothers of America
Catholic War Veterans
Jewish War Veterans
Military Order of the Purple Heart
Reserve Organizations of America
Illinois Association of Veterans Assistance

Veterans of Foreign War
Vietnam Veterans of American
Military Officers Association of America

American Legion
Military Order of the World Wars
Veterans of Foreign Wars
Reserve Organizations of America
Marine Corps League
Department of Military Affairs



Veteran Service Officer Brandon Jagers attends the Roosevelt University Veteran Claim Clinic.



Brandon Jagers, Veterans' Service Officer, and Margo Watson, IDVA Women Veteran's Coordinator, at the 5-100 Battalion 2024 Soldier Family Readiness Holiday event held at the VFW Post #311 in Richton Park. The event was hosted by Margo Watson, Sergeant First Class, and her team of Officers, Senior Noncommissioned Officers, and volunteers. Brandon Jagers presented information about IDVA's services and how it supports veterans. Toys were donated to over 80 veterans and their children.

Evanston VSO Office Opening

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Opens Evanston Office
Veteran Service Officer available to assist with claims, appeals, and guidance.

Veteran Service Officer: Brandon Jagers

Brandon, United States Army veteran, earned a master's degree and bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Northeastern Illinois University. He looks forward to working with veterans and making a positive impact on their futures.

1901 W Howard St, Evanston, IL 60202

Hours: 9am- 4pm

Office: (847) 332-1019

Cell: (815)904-3883

Tuesdays, "Appointments only"



IDVA's Senior Home Administrator Angela Simmons Named President of the Illinois Nursing Home Administrators Association (INHAA)



Angela Simmons, IDVA's Senior Home Administrator, was named president of the Illinois Nursing Home Administrators Association (INHAA) after serving on its board since 2020. The INHAA represents and provides education, training, and support to medical professionals in the long-term care industry. As president of the Board of Directors, she will lead the board in advancing its members, nursing directors, and staff. Angela has been with IDVA since 2013 beginning as the Anna Home Administrator. In 2021, she became the Senior Home Administrator overseeing IDVA's five skilled residential homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy. Angela believes in resident-centered care, and in 2015 she was named the Illinois Pioneering Culture Change Champion of the Year. She also serves on the Illinois Commission on LGBTQ Aging and the Healthcare Subcommittee for Older Adult Services Advisory Committee. Angela is dedicated to changing the culture of long-term care into a homelike "think outside the box" environment. Angie was raised in Southern Illinois and is the proud daughter of a Vietnam veteran. She is committed to service in the community and volunteers much of her time supporting the Special Olympics.

Chicago Home Administrator T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson Completes the Governor's Office Academy of Leadership

Chicago Home Administrator T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson completed The Governor's Office Academy of Leadership (G.O.A.L.). This highly competitive program provides a robust professional development opportunity for mid-level leaders who maintain critical roles in advancing key initiatives and maintaining optimal operations for the State. A Multi-agency panel selects 25-30 applicants for the 11-month program. Monthly sessions are facilitated by industry leaders, academics, agency leaders, and the Governor's staff covering a wide array of topics and conclude with a team project presented to agency leaders and the Governor's Office.

T'Kira joined IDVA as the Administrator of its newest home in Chicago in 2020, leading all efforts to open the doors of the Home to veterans by recruiting, hiring, and training a staff dedicated to providing superior health care with compassion. She led the opening of the Home in 2022 and continues to manage the home and its growth. T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson is a licensed nursing home administrator with a 24-year career in health care, experience in long-term care, home care, and mental health, and is a Certified Dementia Practitioner. T'Kira is a graduate of Western Illinois University; she and her husband Demond, a U.S. Navy veteran, have two boys.



Left to right: Aundra Williams- Assistant Director, CMS, T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson, Andy Manar- Deputy Governor, and Natalie Phelps Finnie- Director, DNR.

Veterans' Home at Quincy Adjutant Amanda Bunch



Amanda Bunch serves as the Veterans' Home at Quincy's new adjutant and brings extensive knowledge in the application, admission, and benefits processes. She is skilled in helping veterans, spouses, and families transition to living in the Veterans' Home. Amanda's career at the Home began in 2008 as a VNAC. As a full-time VNAC, she earned an Associate of Science from John Wood Community College and a Bachelor of Science from Hannibal La-Grange University. In 2016, Amanda was assigned to dietary, and in 2018 she shifted to the adjutant's office as a reimbursement officer.

"I have dedicated my life to serving veterans and ensuring they receive the highest quality of care," said Amanda. "I look forward to continuing my career serving veterans."

Amanda is married to Shawn Bunch and has three children.

IDVA Human Resources Offers On-line Job Skills Seminars

IDVA's Human Resources Department developed a series of online seminars to educate people about opportunities available for employment at IDVA, its culture, and its mission. Additionally, participants may register for seminars on resume writing, interview skills, and other important strategies for successfully gaining employment. Registration is easy through the QR codes provided.

★ Serve those who served ★

Join IDVA for a series of virtual job fairs to learn more about becoming part of Team IDVA

Date	Time	HFS Virtual	Event Registration
1/2/2025	3:00-3:45 PM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees	
1/3/2025	9:00-9:45 AM	Creating a Profile	
1/6/2025	3:00-3:45 PM	How to Read a Job Bulletin	
1/7/2025	9:30-10:15 AM	Interview Tips and Tricks	
1/9/2025	9:00-9:45 AM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points	
1/13/2025	12:00-12:45 PM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees	
1/14/2025	12:00-12:45 PM	Creating a Profile	
1/15/2025	9:00-9:45 AM	How to Read a Job Bulletin	
1/16/2025	2:00-2:45 PM	Interview Tips and Tricks	
1/17/2025	3:00-3:45 PM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points	
1/22/2025	3:30-4:15 PM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees	
1/27/2025	2:30-3:15 PM	Creating a Profile	

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Veterans' Homes

Veterans' Home at Chicago: Vetsgiving



Veterans' Home at Chicago



Veterans' Home at Chicago celebrate Christmas. Left to right Joshua Wilkerson (son of Administrator), Home Administrator T'Kira Siler-Wilkerson, and Charles Revor (Santa), Army Veteran.



Albert Bruno, Army veteran, getting ready for his photo shoot for the Veterans' Home at Chicago yearbook.

Veterans' Home at Manteno



Ed Gergits (left), U.S. Army veteran, and his brother John (right), United States Air Force veteran, enjoy their families at the Veterans' Home at Manteno holiday party. Ed and John, with sixteen years between them, never lived under the same roof until they became next-door neighbors at the Veterans' Home at Manteno.



IDVA Chief of Staff with the Grinch, also known as Wally Horner, Jr., United States Army veteran, at the Veterans' Home at Manteno.



Veterans' Home at Manteno resident Leroy Schweitzer, U.S. Army veteran enjoys a visit from Santa at a dinner hosted by the Sons of the American Legion Squadron, Post 755 – Manteno.



Frank McGuire, United States Marine Corps veteran, and his family enjoying holiday cheer at the Veteran's Home at Manteno.

Veterans' Home at Quincy



Veterans Home at Quincy: Turkey treats: Resident and United States Air Force veteran Jerry Malin with his wife Claudia.



How One Texas A&M Student is Working to Bring Missing in Action Soldiers Home

History PhD Student Tristan Krause Applies His Skills as a Researcher and Analyst for the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA)

By Rob Dixon, Texas A&M Graduate and Professional School. Oversees communications and marketing. Published with permission.

As far back as Tristan Krause can remember, his favorite subject has been history. He attributes that to his father's influence. "When I was a kid," Krause recalled, "my dad and I would hang out on the couch and watch these Walter Cronkite-narrated war documentaries. I have this one really vivid memory of us watching Pearl Harbor on Christmas day when I was about five or six years old and my mom just being aghast."

That childhood love of history has stuck with Krause over the years, withstanding the warning of some naysayers who cautioned him against pursuing a humanities subject for a college major and career path. "Even my high school history teacher," Krause said, "told me a career as a historian wouldn't pay."

Yet, even as a graduate student at Texas A&M, Krause is seeing a payoff – if not in the sense intended by his high school history teacher. Working as the historian on teams commissioned by the U.S. military's Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), Krause is putting the skills and knowledge he's acquiring in his academic training to work to help locate and bring home the remains of missing American soldiers lost in conflict.

Leaving No Soldiers Behind

According to records compiled by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), almost 82,000 American soldiers – from World War II, the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the Cold War, and the Gulf Wars – are still missing or unaccounted for. Finding and bringing these missing soldiers home is at the core of the military's "no soldier left behind" code.

Yet it is also a daunting challenge, complicated by the passage of time. To take on that challenge, the DPAA assembles interdisciplinary teams of historians, archaeologists, geneticists, anthropologists, geologists and others, each of whom has expertise in a field essential to the process of finding and identifying missing soldiers. Historians, Krause says, play an important role.

After weeks of work, the team was able to locate and identify the remains of Walter "Buster" Stone, from Andalusia, Alabama, who died when he crashed his single-engine plane.

"It's a really powerful feeling for the whole team when you succeed - exciting but somber at the same time. You just stop, take your hats off, and reflect on the fact that this guy has been lost for almost 75 years, and you've found him. You figure he would want some company after all that time, and you know his family is going to get some closure."

Joining Texas A&M and Participating in the Humanities Coalition for Diverse Career Pathways Program

After being a part of that successful mission, Krause knew grad school was the next step in acquiring the knowledge and experience he would need to make a career out of the work he was so passionate about. He chose Texas A&M because of the university's military ties and emphasis on public service. In researching graduate programs, Krause had also made a strong connection with history professor and mentor, Adam Seipp.

"I spoke to Dr. Seipp on the phone when I was researching grad schools. We clicked right away. He is familiar with the DPAA's work and was an instant supporter. He explained to me that Texas A&M has a lot of ties to federal internships with the branches of the military and sends a lot of graduates to work at the DPAA. He's also interested in creating public partnerships like Wisconsin's Missing in Action Recovery and Identification Project for Texas A&M. It felt like the right place for me and it has worked out great. I'm a Seipp disciple," Krause joked.

Seipp, who is now the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences as well as Professor of History, is equally impressed with Krause and sees the work he does as a potential track for other humanities graduate students. "Tristan's field work demonstrates some of ways that the study of the humanities can make a valuable contribution to public service. His training as a historian and his work in the field complement each other," Seipp said.

Seipp has long been interested in connecting humanities PhD graduates with careers outside academia.



Missing In Action Soldiers



Krause working in Germany, summer 2021 (Image Courtesy: Tristan Krause)

He oversees Texas A&M's membership in The Humanities Coalition, a group of 17 universities devoted to finding innovative ways to expand career paths for humanities PhDs in government, non-profit, and public service. "Students who earn humanities PhDs are terrific researchers, communicators, and analysts," Seipp said.

This past summer, Krause was able to travel and participate in two DPAA digs in Sicily and Belgium on funding provided by the Humanities Coalition, giving him more experience using his skills as a historian to help find missing soldiers and bring them home. "It's both personally and professionally important that I'm able to work on these digs in the summer," Krause said. "If I want to launch a career with the DPAA, I need to get as much experience as I can working with other specialists in the field."

Krause also appreciates the efforts of The Humanities Coalition to connect students with opportunities in public service. "It's consistent with the idea that the university should be beneficial and serve the wider state," he said.

"The first step in finding someone," Krause explained, "is to thoroughly understand the context for what is essentially their worst day ever, which requires poring over an inordinate amount of historical sources. That helps us pinpoint the site for the dig. Once we're on site, the historian is there to identify artifacts and continue piecing the story together."

It's work Krause finds incredibly gratifying. "It's a tangible, tactile form of history that's fulfilling an important commitment," he said.

Education and Public Service Roots

Krause grew up in Wisconsin. His parents – his mother an ecologist for the United States Forest Service and his father a biologist for the State of Wisconsin – influenced his view that learning and service go hand-in-hand.

"My parents have advanced degrees," Krause explained. Their love of higher learning is joined with a belief that they should use their knowledge in service to others. They have passed on to me that sense of purpose – that you should do something with your life that is bigger than yourself. So, yeah, I find history interesting, but bar trivia is also interesting. I want to put what I'm learning to use."

A picture of how history and service could intersect began to take shape for Krause in an undergraduate course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on the process of recovering and identifying the remains of U.S. soldiers killed in World War II in New Guinea.

"It was an amazing course," Krause said. "We learned that, in order to find these bodies, you have to understand the history of the campaigns. That's how you find clues about where to find the bodies, give them a name, and bring them back to their families. I thought 'Okay. This is what I want to do.'"

In the summer of 2018, after he graduated from the University of Wisconsin, Krause was fortunate enough to get his first opportunity to be part of a field research team. That team, part of the University of Wisconsin Missing in Action Recovery and Identification Project, traveled to France to find a missing soldier from WWII.

After weeks of work, the team was able to locate and identify the remains of Walter "Buster" Stone, from Andalusia, Alabama, who died when he crashed his single-engine plane.

"It's a really powerful feeling for the whole team when you succeed -- exciting, but somber at the same time. You just stop, take your hats off, and reflect on the fact that this guy has been lost for almost 75 years and you've found him. You figure he would want some company after all that time and you know his family is going to get some closure."



Do you have a Compliment, Recommendation, Question, or Complaint?

Illinois Veterans Accountability Unit (VAU)

Let us Know!

If you are an Illinois veteran or other Illinois resident who seeks services from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA); a resident of any Illinois Veterans' Home, a family member of a resident, a visitor of any Illinois Veterans' Home; a vendor and/or contractor of the IDVA; or staff of the IDVA, we want to hear from you.

This office welcomes feedback about the services being provided to the veterans of Illinois.
If you received exceptional service or have concerns involving any member of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, please let us know.

Email us at

IDVA.accountability@illinois.gov

or Call our Toll-Free Helpline

1-855-660-7011

More information about the VAU can be found on the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs website

<https://veterans.illinois.gov/>

The VAU maintains the confidentiality of investigations, complainants, and witnesses to the maximum extent allowable, but must disclose complaints to the Office of the Executive Inspector General (OEIG).

You can obtain more information about the OEIG or file a complaint with the OEIG directly through its website at **<https://oeig.illinois.gov/>**.

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.



**ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS**

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