VETERANS
CONNECTIONS
News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 4, Issue 2 ★ February 2024

★ Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

I am thrilled to present to you the new IDVA logo, a labor of love, as we researched, brainstormed, and worked closely with a creative and talented veteran and designer Jessika Savage to create a fresh new look for IDVA. We are the same agency committed to our mission of supporting veterans to thrive in Illinois, but with a stunning new logo to bring us closer to the veterans we serve. For 78 years, IDVA has been identified with the Illinois state seal, and while it is steeped in history, t his is the first logo designed specifically for the agency and the veterans it serves.

IDVA
ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

The components in the logo contain important symbolism that reflects the mission of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs and those it serves. It reflects the evolution of IDVA as it has met the changing needs of Illinois veterans through innovation, and technology. Its images honor those who have served in all branches of our nation's military in every capacity around the globe.

- ★ The primary design elements are illustrated in the "V" in IDVA:
- ★ The red and white stripes represent the branches of the military.
- ★ The silhouettes represent the diverse population of veterans who have served in uniform.
- ★ The star communicates to veterans that IDVA is their North Star, a guide to serve them so they can thrive in Illinois.
- ★ The red, white, and blue hues demonstrate pride in service and patriotism.

This historic moment encapsulates this mission and vision for the future, and I hope that you appreciate our new look! If you would like to view a video we sent around the state, you may view it here: https://multimedia.illinois.gov/dva/DVA-New-Logo-2024.html

Thank you for staying connected to the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs.

Sincerely,

Terry Prince
U.S. Navy Veteran and IDVA Director

The logo was designed by Jessika Savage (jessikasavage.com), Creative Director, Graphic Designer, and U.S. Army combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Jessika first worked with IDVA during college as part of the work-study program. She is proud to continue her work with IDVA by delivering branding to help better serve her fellow Illinois veterans.

Monthly Highlights

Black History Month

During Black History Month, IDVA recognizes the accomplishments of African American women in the U.S. military and those in senior leadership at the agency. Illinois is home to nearly 50,000 women veterans. Nationally, the women veteran population is small compared to their male counterparts, however, studies show that by 2040 the women veteran population is expected to nearly double, making women the fastest-growing veteran population. African American women represent 30 percent of females in the military, and their courage is evident in their careers and contributions. IDVA also featured African American women veterans who serve on its senior leadership team. IDVA is stronger because of their contributions and dedication to serving their fellow veterans.

Illinois is extremely proud of the Women veterans who have served and those who continue to serve in our military. Our commitment to women veterans is to ensure equal access to state and federal benefits including those benefits and health services that are specific to your needs.

To locate your nearest Veteran Service Officer, call the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs at 800-437-9824 or visit our website: https://veterans.illinois.gov. Female Veteran Service Officers are available. To learn more about IDVA's women veterans' program, click here: https://veterans.illinois.gov/programs/women.html

Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Renysha Brown, the Acting Director of the Veteran's Accountability Unit, which shall receive complaints and recommendations from: (i) veterans and other Illinois residents who seek services from the Department; (ii) residents of Veterans' Homes, their families, and visitors; (iii) vendors and contractors of the Department; and (iv) staff of the Department.

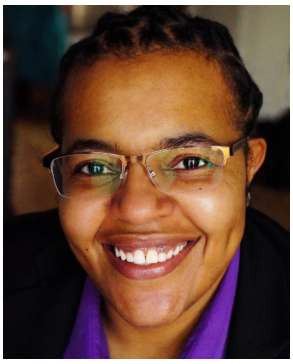
Lt Col Brown's 28-year military career included active-duty Service in the United States Army and the Illinois Army National Guard. At the time of her retirement, she was the highest-ranking black female in the Illinois Army National Guard. She is a combat veteran of two conflicts, Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom, and she also participated in Operation Crescent Relief - Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. She began her career as an active duty enlisted soldier with the 7th Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment, Ft. Campbell, KY, and earned her commission in Officer Candidate School while in the Illinois Army National Guard. She also served with the 1st Battalion 411th (LS) Regiment, an Army Reserve unit at Fort Knox, KY on special assignment.

In addition to her military career, Renysha served as the District Director of Illinois Congressional District 12, Management Analyst in the United States Property and Fiscal Office of the Illinois Army National Guard, Assistant Professor of Military Science, and Recruiting Operations Officer at Washington University in St. Louis. She was also the Regional Coordinator for the Lincoln's Challenge Academy.

"I have a vested interest in ensuring that veterans receive the proper care and services that they earned and are entitled to,' said Renysha. "I value my role in resolving the concerns of veterans and working alongside IDVA to serve Illinois veterans."

Renysha earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Western Illinois University and a master's degree from Webster University. She serves on the Board of Directors for St. Clair County Teen Court. She is a life member of both the National Guard Association of Illinois (NGAI) and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and is a member of the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA).

Monthly Highlights



Brittney Chitwood, a U.S. Army veteran, is the Business Administrator for the Chicago Veterans' Home. She joined the home a year after its opening after spending 13 years with the Department of Human Services (DHS) beginning as a Mental Health Technician. While in the military, Brittney served as a Chemical Operations Specialist--well versed in nuclear, biological, chemical, and radiological materials. She conducted personnel and property decontamination and obscuration operations in the event of an attack. She served six years in the U.S. Army where she traveled, established long-term friendships, and is grateful for the opportunity to serve her country.

While working full-time at DHS, Brittney earned her bachelor's in business administration with a concentration in project management from DeVry University, graduating Magna Cum Laude. Brittney was also inducted into the Delta Mu Delta Honor Society.

Danielle Luevano, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, has been with IDVA since 2018 serving in many different roles. She is currently IDVA's Operations and Programs Division Manager where she oversees the War Graves Registration, State War Bonuses, Specially Adaptive Housing Grant, Veterans with Disabilities Tax Exemption Programs, and Military License Plates. She also supervises the Supplies and Services and Records Sections and is responsible for the upkeep and operations of IDVA's headquarters, ensuring a safe work environment.

"It is an honor to serve my fellow veterans and translate my military experience to ensure that IDVA is positioned to serve Illinois veterans best," said Danielle.

While in service, Danielle served eight years around the globe including Okinawa, Japan; Arlington, Virginia; the Pentagon; Beaufort, South Carolina; and a tour in Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Margo Watson, currently serving in the U.S. Army Reserve, is IDVA's Senior Program Manager for its Women Veterans Program where she advocates for the needs of women veterans and their families. The program offers women veterans resources for equitable access to their earned benefits and provides programs to build a community of women and recognize their contributions to our nation's military.

"I am deeply invested in growing IDVA's Women Veterans Programs so that women veterans have a voice and a community," said Margo.

Margo enlisted in the United States Army Reserves in 1997 and has spent the past 26 ½ years in many roles including Combat Medic (68W). She was mobilized during Operation Enduring Freedom after 9-11 to serve in Fort McCoy. Currently, she is a First-Class Personnel Specialist (42A) and Senior Instructor. Additional roles within the Battalion include Quality Assurance Stakeholder, the Family Readiness Liaison, Master Resilience Trainer, and the Battalion's Suicide Prevention Specialist.

Margo earned her bachelor's degree in liberal arts, with an emphasis in Agriculture, Computer Information Systems, and Philosophy, and her master's degree in Sociology and minoring in Psychology from Lincoln University in Jefferson City, MO.

National Association of State Veterans Homes Winter Conference

Senior Home Administrator Angela Simmons attended the annual National Association of State Veterans Homes (NASVH) Winter Conference in Washington DC. to learn about important issues impacting state veterans homes including the State Home Per Diem Program, State Home Construction Grant Program, and State Veterans Home VA Survey Process. During this time, she had the opportunity to meet with the Illinois congressional delegation, specifically Chairman Mike Bost (Chair of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs) and legislative staff for Senator Durbin, Senator Duckworth and Congresswoman Budzinski to advocate for legislative priorities and discuss critical topics about NASVH and IDVA's mission to secure and improve care for veterans. These legislative priorities include:

- Mandate that VA pay for high-cost medications for veterans in State Veterans Homes
- Require VA to cover the cost of all specialty care for veterans in State Veterans Homes
- Raise VA's basic per diem rates for veterans in State Veterans Homes
- Increase funding for the State Veteran Home Construction Grant Program
- Provide "Buy America, Build America" Waivers for SVH Construction Projects

In 1888, the State Veterans Home Program was established to care for veterans through a relationship between the states and the federal government. Currently, there are 162 state veterans' homes located across the nation caring for 30,000 veterans.

To learn more about Illinois' five Veterans' Homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy and eligibility, click here: https://veterans.illinois.gov/services-benefits/homes/homes.html

IDVA Welcomes
Matthew McCormick
Veterans' Home Coordinator

Matthew McCormick, IDVA's Veterans' Home Coordinator, brings extensive experience in all aspects of construction including HVAC, plumbing, electrical, framing, drywall, tile work, and finish carpentry, which he will apply to his role as overseeing the Homes' construction projects. He has worked hands-on in all technical areas and managed extensive projects through completion. He started his own construction company in 2004. Matthew, a U.S. Army veteran, served four years of active duty and was deployed to Somalia. After separation from active duty, he joined the Texas National Guard where he supported the emergency response to the 500-year flood in New Braunfels Texas in 1998.

"Matthew's broad experience positions him to oversee the construction projects at IDVA's five homes across the state," said Director Prince. "Matthew will manage each unique project that is integral in elevating the daily lives of veterans in our care."

In Matthew's role, he serves as the liaison between the Illinois Veterans' Homes division, other state agencies, and the legislature. He reports on the budget, development, and prioritization of construction projects and the Agency's long-range capital plan. He also serves as the Agency Emergency Manager ensuring that emergency plans are in place and enacted.

"I applied for this position as an opportunity to give back to my fellow veterans," said Matthew. "I have a vast background in construction and a versed understanding of how to improve the standards of living for my fellow veterans."

Matthew has four children and a fiancé. His oldest son is commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers as a Civil Engineer becoming a 3rd generation soldier.

Special Congratulations

IDVA extends its congratulations to Sean Beckford, son of Northern Region Supervisor Melissa Beckford, on his appointment to the United States Naval Academy. Sean joined the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program four years ago as a Cadet and later became Commander of the drum line and Chief of Staff. He is graduating from Auburn High School in Rockford, IL with honors, including linguistic proficiency in three languages.

"Sean received scholarships from various universities, including a full Naval and Army ROTC scholarship, and has chosen to pursue his first choice—the United States Naval Academy," said Melissa. "I am immensely proud that my son will soon embark on a path to become a dedicated service member and, eventually, a veteran."

Women's Health

February is American Heart Month. An estimated 44 million women in the U.S. are affected by cardiovascular diseases. As documented by the VA, the symptoms of heart attack can be different in women versus men and are often misunderstood—even by some physicians.

Ninety percent of women have one or more risk factors for heart disease or stroke; however, 80 percent of heart disease and stroke events may be prevented by lifestyle changes and education. VA Women's Health Services in collaboration with the American Heart Association spent February raising awareness and education about heart disease and stroke among women veterans. To learn more about VA services and hear the story about a veteran nurse's journey with heart disease, click here: February is Heart Month - A Veteran Nurse's Story - Veterans Health Administration (va.gov)

News from the Capitol

The Illinois General Assembly's spring session has begun, with the legislature wrapping up the third week of session. Thousands of bills have been filed in this two-year General Assembly with many filed in the last eight weeks. As of right now, IDVA is tracking over 30 bills that directly affect veterans or their family members, many of which will be assigned to the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee or the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. For the most part, most of this legislation is pending and has not had a hearing yet. However, two pieces of legislation have passed their initial committee hearing. Both SB 2769 (Hastings) and SB 2751 (McConchie) passed out of their initial committee and are on the calendar order of second reading in their first chamber.

Most recently, on February 21, the Governor delivered his budget address to Illinoisans. State agencies have begun to release the details of their FY25 budgets and will file individual agency budget bills shortly. IDVA's first budget hearing with the House Health and Human Services Appropriations Committee will take place in March, and a Senate hearing will follow.

Field Services

Enrique Cabrera, IDVA SAA, Dr. Frank Delatorre, IDVA VSO and Randall Tyner, Illinois Assistant Attorney General Military and Veterans Rights Bureau, attend the Veterans Resource Fair and Town Hall at the VFW Post 1197 in Batavia on February 2.

IDVA Veteran Service Officer Michele Richards and Mike Rodgers of the Forest Park VA Vet Center, participate in the Franklin Park 2024 Annual Stand Down on January 28th.

Richard Clark, Veterans Outreach Program Specialist, Milwaukee Vet Center, attend the Forest Park Veteran Center Resource Fair.

New Veteran Service Officer in Champaign

Diane Moncrief, Veteran Service Officer in Champaign, is a U.S. Army veteran serving in the U.S. Army Reserve, assigned as Battalion Commander of a Transportation Battalion in Baltimore, Maryland. She recently returned from a mobilization to Kuwait. She earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and has served in the Illinois Army National Guard and Army Reserve. She lives with her spouse Richard in Clinton, IL.

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 about poor performance 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.

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