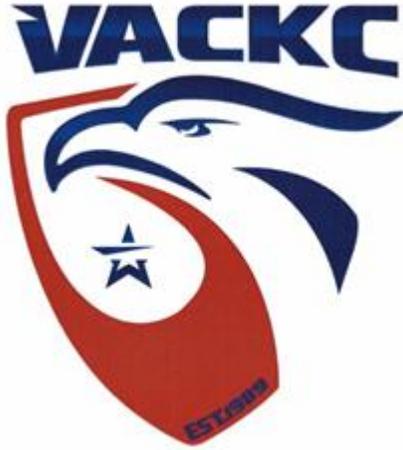


2023



**Veterans Assistance Commission of  
Kankakee County**

**Michael L. Peeken  
Superintendent**

**[2023 ANNUAL GOVERNORS REPORT]**

*As required by 330 ILCS 45 (The Military Veterans Assistance Act) I am submitting the Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County Annual Report for the Fiscal Year ending November 30, 2023.*



## Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County

581 William Latham Sr. Dr. Suite 302. Bourbonnais, IL 60914

PH 815-937-8489 • Fax 815-937-3655

The Honorable Pritzker  
Governor of Illinois  
State Capital Room 207  
Springfield, IL 62706

Dear Governor Pritzker,

Our report this year shows some phenomenal increases. You may recall that last year in November, we moved our office to the same location as the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Hines Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). We are one of very few, if any across the Nation that has a true one stop shop for veterans. Veterans in Kankakee can take care of their healthcare in Suite 301 and talk to an Accredited Service Officer in Suite 302. Kankakee County is setting high standards for VACs and the VA. Our Assistant Superintendent had the honor of speaking in person to the Secretary of the VHA in February of 2023 in Washington DC. She spoke to him about this collaborative move and he was highly impressed and was recommending to new CBOCs that are being built or remodeled to have them consider putting Veteran Service Officers within the CBOCs. This is done in the VHA Medical Centers across the Nation. It is only logical to do it in the Community Based Outpatient Clinics too. After all, the County Veteran Service Officers are the “boots on ground” in almost every community across the Nation.

### **VETERANS FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

Veterans Assistance is available to eligible low-income veterans/surviving spouses. Assistance is paid directly to vendors for Rent or Mortgage, Utilities, and Personal Hygiene. Emergency Veterans Assistance is available to eligible veterans who are not eligible for Veterans Assistance and in need of a onetime assistance for arrears housing, heat, or electric. **In 2023, the VAC provided some form of Financial Assistance and informational referral to veterans in need of financial help to 222 veterans/families.** This year the VACKC saw an increase in financial assistance of \$7688.92 over FY22.

Housing	Utilities	Food / Hygiene	Medical*	Emergency	Transportation	Burial	2023 Total
\$ 34122.	\$2839.59	\$1600	\$ 0	\$284.55	\$0	\$0	\$38846.14

#### ➤ **Housing**

Rental or mortgage payments are made by check directly to the landlord or bank. The address must be verified as being a residence within Kankakee County for which the applicant has legal control by means of lease or mortgage. We saw a bit of a decrease in office visits for financial assistance, but an overall increase in the dollars of assistance provided to veterans/families of Kankakee County.

➤ **Utilities**

Utilities that are in the veteran's name are made by check directly to the vendor. The VACKC will cover bills submitted by the applicant for payment of Electric, Gas and Propane, and Water.

➤ **Food/Hygiene**

All food/hygiene purchases are made by gift certificate to Aldi Foods. The gift certificates are marked to prevent the purchase of tobacco or alcohol products.

➤ **Emergency Assistance**

Emergency Assistance fills in the gaps when a veteran finds themselves homeless or about to be homeless. This fund helps with back rent and or hotel shelter, arrears in phone bills, and other miscellaneous needs not covered by our general financial assistance. This year we were lucky to rely heavily on community partners to supply a lot of our needs in this category. We had \$284.55 given in emergency assistance.

➤ **Transportation**

Transportation assistance is provided in the form of Metro Bus tokens and passes. In the year to come we will be obtaining a few gas cards to help with transportation to and from work or medical appointments.

➤ **Burial**

Burial assistance is for indigent veterans that were residents of Kankakee County at the time of their passing. We have worked closely with the Kankakee County Coroner's office to file with the Veterans Benefit Administration or seek reimbursement for indigent veteran burials.

**VAC TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM**

The VAC has a 12-passenger bus that provides rides to veterans for medical appointments to VAMC Edward Hines. We have a small pool of drivers. All transportation costs are due to fuel and maintenance. This year we did purchase a used mini-van that helps us save on fuel expenses. We have seen a HUGE difference in our fuel bills. **In 2023, the VAC transported 377 veterans to and from their appointments at Hines VA.**

**VA CLAIMS ASSISTANCE**

The Veterans Service Officers (VSO's) for the VAC of Kankakee County are recognized by the VA General Council to represent veterans all the way to the VA Board of Appeals. We assist our veterans with Disability, Pension, Special Monthly Compensation, and VA Healthcare claims. **In 2023, the VAC assisted veterans with filing over 2000 forms with the VA. With 167 adjudicated claims, with \$2,348,355.11 being returned to worthy veterans served by our office.**

**VETERANS TREATMENT COURT**

The VAC provides an important role in the Veterans Treatment Court of the 21<sup>st</sup> Judicial Circuit by acting as a portal into the court and linking veterans to their VA benefits. As the VTC Court Coordinator for the 21<sup>st</sup> Jurisdiction, our Assistant Superintendent is charged with tracking program functions and ensuring ongoing education for the VTC team. The VACKC also provides the Mentor Coordinator to the VTC as well as an Assistant Coordinator/Administrative liaison to help with all matters pertaining to tracking, staffing, and court dockets. In 2023, our VTC celebrated 10 years of having a specialty court for veterans with a reunion of not only graduates, but also the staff that participated in setting up the court and anyone who'd ever served as a team member. Our VTC had 4 previous graduates die this last year. We honored their family members during the reunion. **In 2023, 4 veterans were referred for the program. All 4 veterans were not accepted into the program. Two of them their charges were dismissed. One did not live in County/Jurisdiction. And one, did not want to participate. We had 4 graduates**

**successfully complete the VTC program. We currently have 4 active veterans in Veterans Treatment Court. One participant is set to graduate on January 4, 2024. Please feel free to join us.**

With our office being a viable part of Kankakee County, I believe that our board is made up of some of the most passionate and hardest working veterans from around the community. Our Commission board closely monitors the activities of the VACKC with resolute judgment.

We will continue to search for and implement new initiatives to help the veterans and their survivors of Kankakee County. Please contact me directly if there are any questions concerning the information submitted.

As the Superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County, I am proud of the work the staff does for our Veterans. It is an honor and a pleasure to present this report to you. We have some of the most compassionate VSOs and definitely the hardest working team to honor our Nations' Veterans.

**The graphs provided show that 4037 (up 1678 from FY22) veterans/family members came into our office for assistance. Of those coming into our office, 3729 (up 1730 from FY22) was for general assistance and appointments, 222 for financial assistance, 55 homeless, and 31 discount card applications.** We currently have approximately 120 vendors in the Kankakee area that specifically honor our card, but veterans have used it all over the US to receive discounts on things like hotel, dinner, amusement parks, etc. We are proud to be one of the very few that offer this card.

## **2023 HIGHLIGHTS**

- Ashley has become our Senior Veteran Service Officer and is doing phenomenal work. Ashley took the NACVSO Advanced Appeals course.
- Our last year's hire of an Administrative Assistant has now become a County Veteran Service Officer. Amanda Sadler will be a triage VSO to help veterans who just walk in from the clinic or for the first time. She will help them get set up in our system as well as start the claims process if that is what they are looking to do.
- Hired a new Administrative Assistant. Ben Widdicombe hopes to be a VSO soon. So, he will be moving up too.
- Hired a new, soon to be, Veteran Service Officer to be an Outreach Specialist and Mentor Coordinator. Eric Peterson is well known in the community and perfect for the job.
- Karen continues to have an elected position as Treasurer for the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers.
- Karen is also a volunteer trainer for the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers.
- Karen is co-chair of the Education Committee for the Illinois Association of County Veteran Assistance Commissions (IACVAC)
- These past two years, great strides have been made in collaboration between training with IACVAC and IDVA VSOs. In May, 10 IACVAC service officers joined IDVA at their yearly training. And in September, 10 IDVA service officers joined IACVAC for their yearly training. We hope that this continues with eventually having one big joint training for all VSOs within the State of Illinois.
- Continued to the partnership with Non-Profit – Project Headspace and Timing. Our goal is to build tiny homes and/or renovate a building in Kankakee County to help all of Illinois end Veteran Homelessness. We continue to look for suitable land to base the operation.

The newest project for Project Headspace and Timing is a Veteran Advocacy program which will partner trained peer support veterans in need with volunteer veterans through an app that anyone can use. We've been working with local law enforcement, first responders, and the local hospitals to use the veteran peer support veterans to be with veterans also.

- Partnered with VA, Catholic Charities and the SSVF grant with homeless prevention and rapid rehousing.
- Continued to work with the Kankakee County Community Crisis Response Team.
- Participated in the Central Illinois Continuum of Care.
- Attended the Illinois Joining Forces Summit as a team to learn and grow.

## **2024 GOALS**

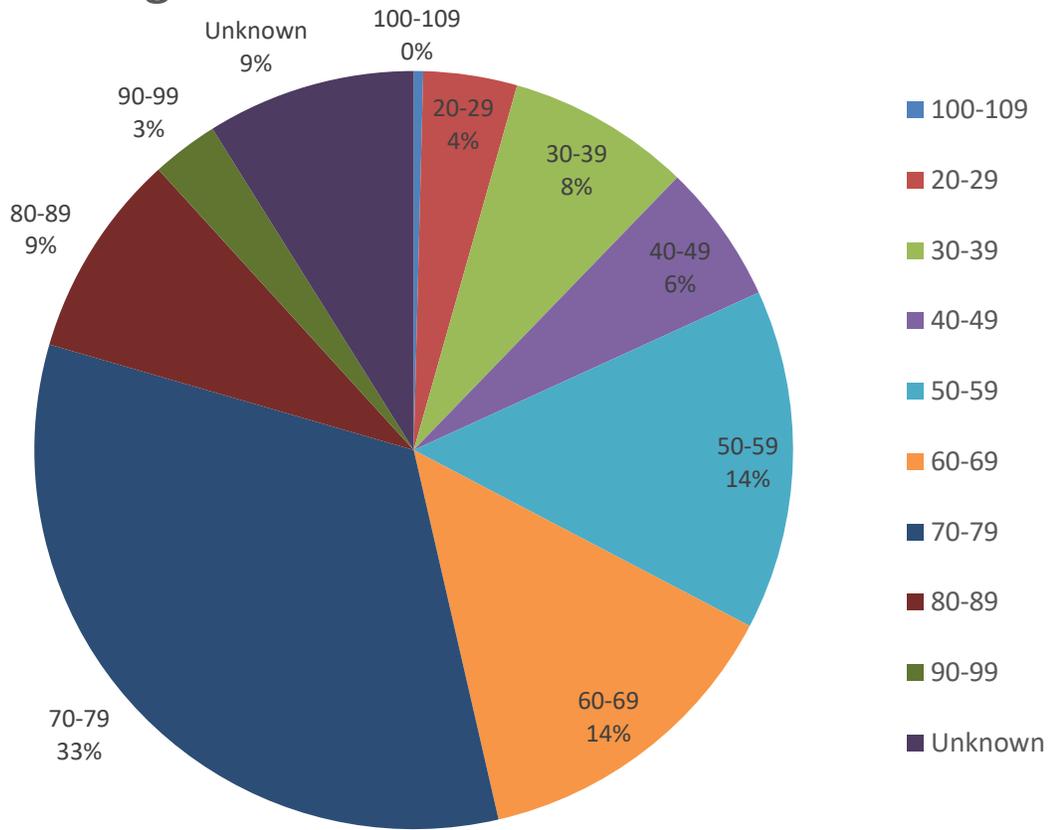
- Partner with the KCHA to help with the completion of the veteran permanent supportive housing unit on Washington Ave in Kankakee Illinois. Building of this project has finally started.
- Hire one or two more Service Officers as the year goes on – promote from within first
- Looking at an expansion for more office space and a board room. There is 1500 square feet available on this floor which we have already gotten architectural drawings and bids for. We are currently scheduling 4-6 weeks out. Having more space would help us to be able to hire one or two more Service Officers – so we can have office space for them.
- Seek grants for the Veterans Court and our expansion build out.
- Work on fund raising events for Project Headspace and Timing.
- Work on an outreach program to include Service Officers in the community. One of our latest hires will be this person and we hope to start this right after the new year.
- Continue Outreach to the Assisted Living and Nursing Homes

Respectfully,

*Michael L Peeken*

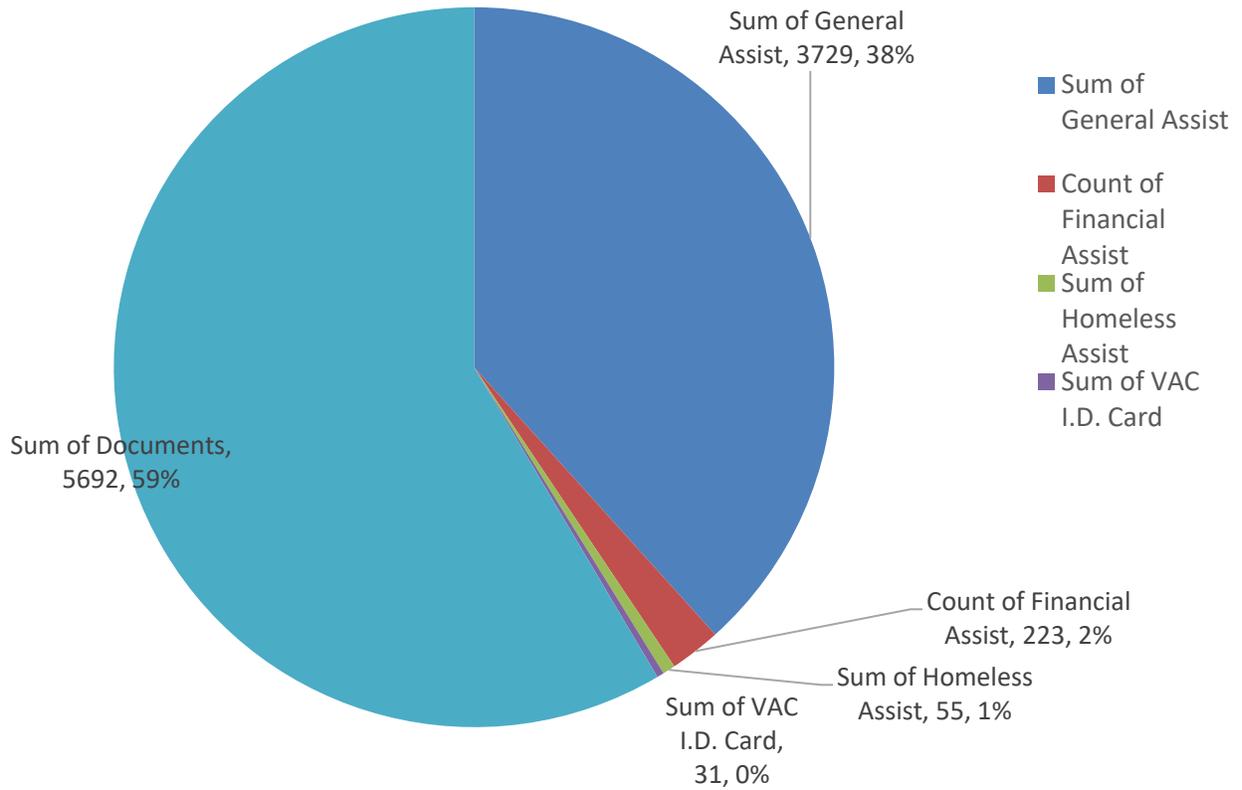
Michael L. Peeken  
Superintendent

# Veteran Age



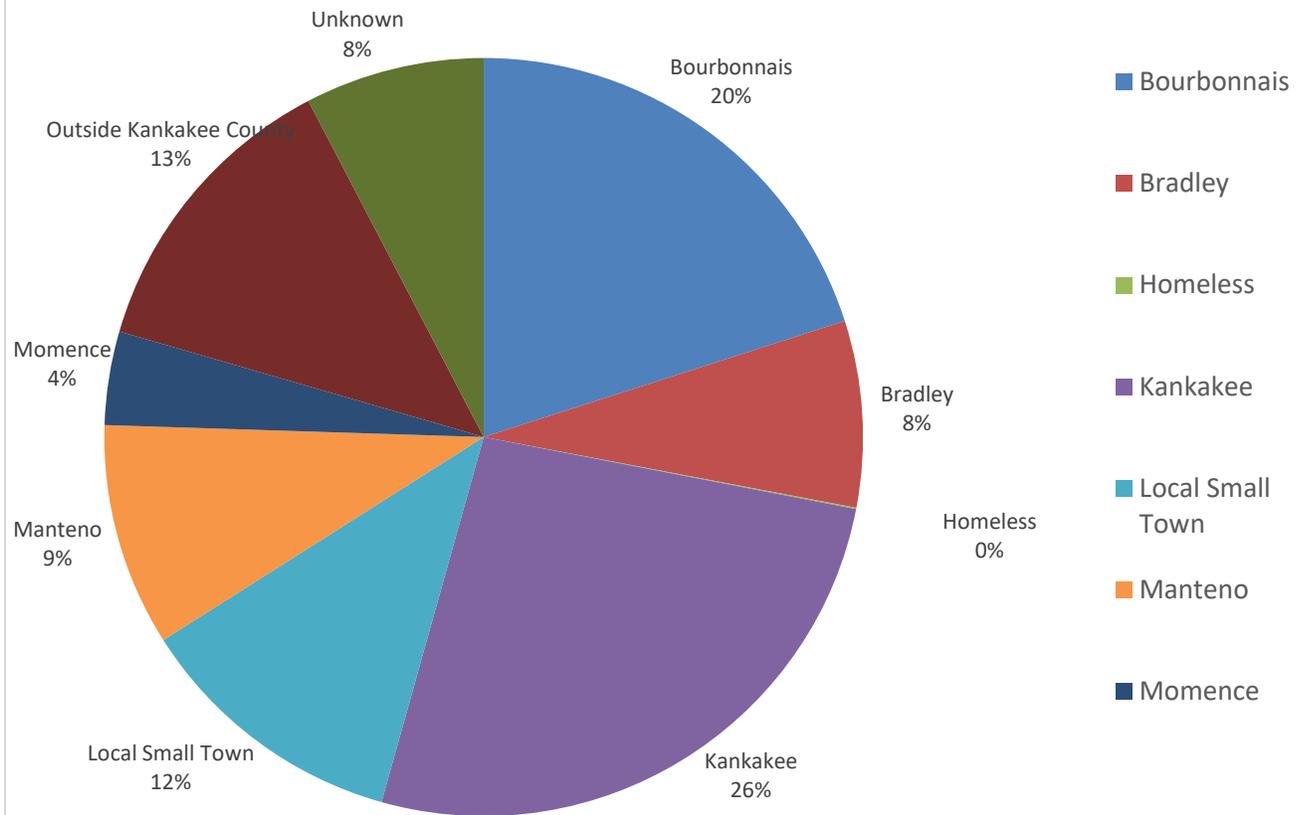
Age	
20-29	149
30-39	292
40-49	222
50-59	541
60-69	512
70-79	1234
80-89	327
90-99	106
100+	15
Unknown	332

# Assistance



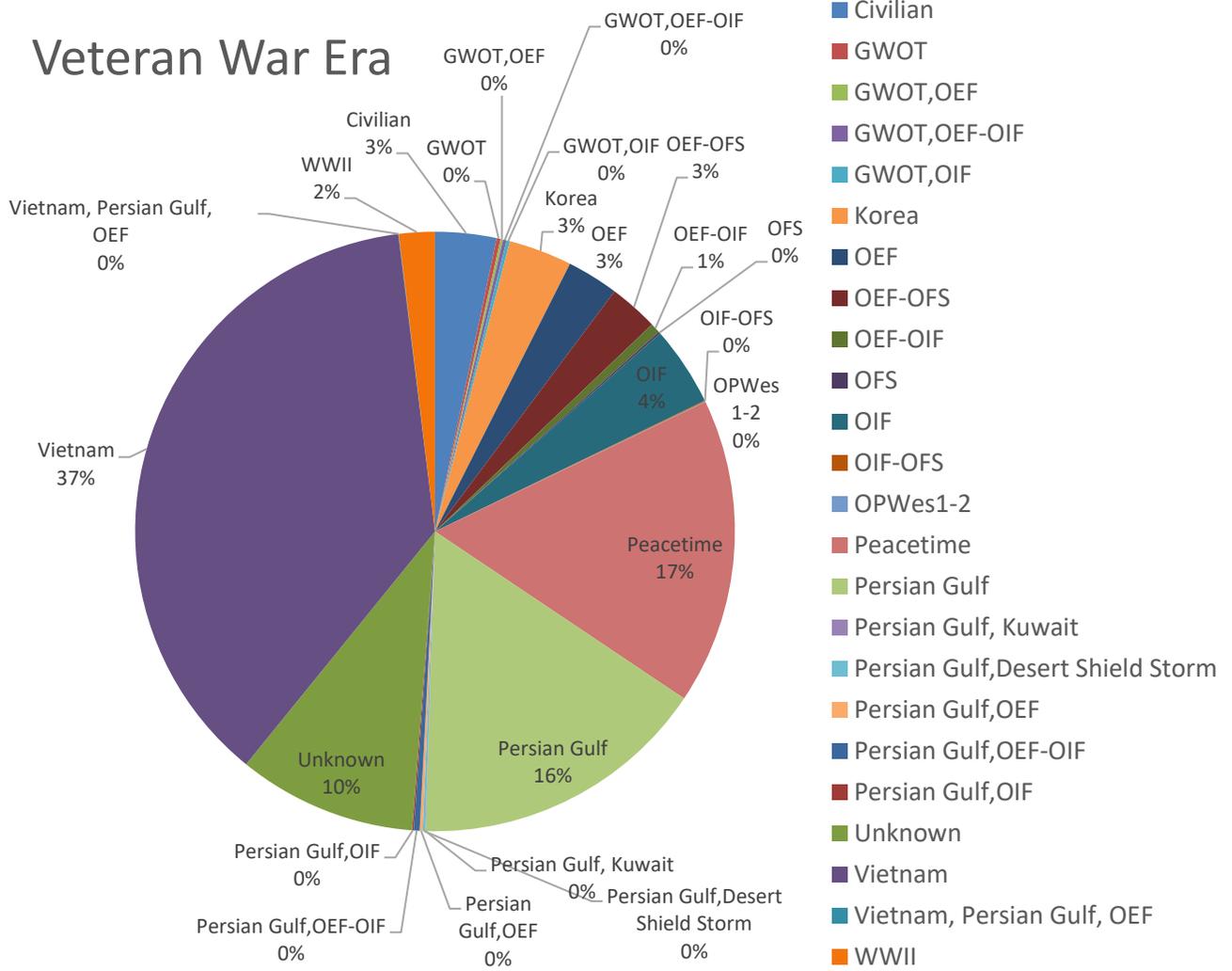
Assistance	
General	3729
Financial	222
Homeless	55
Photo ID	31
Processed Documents	5692

# Veteran Location



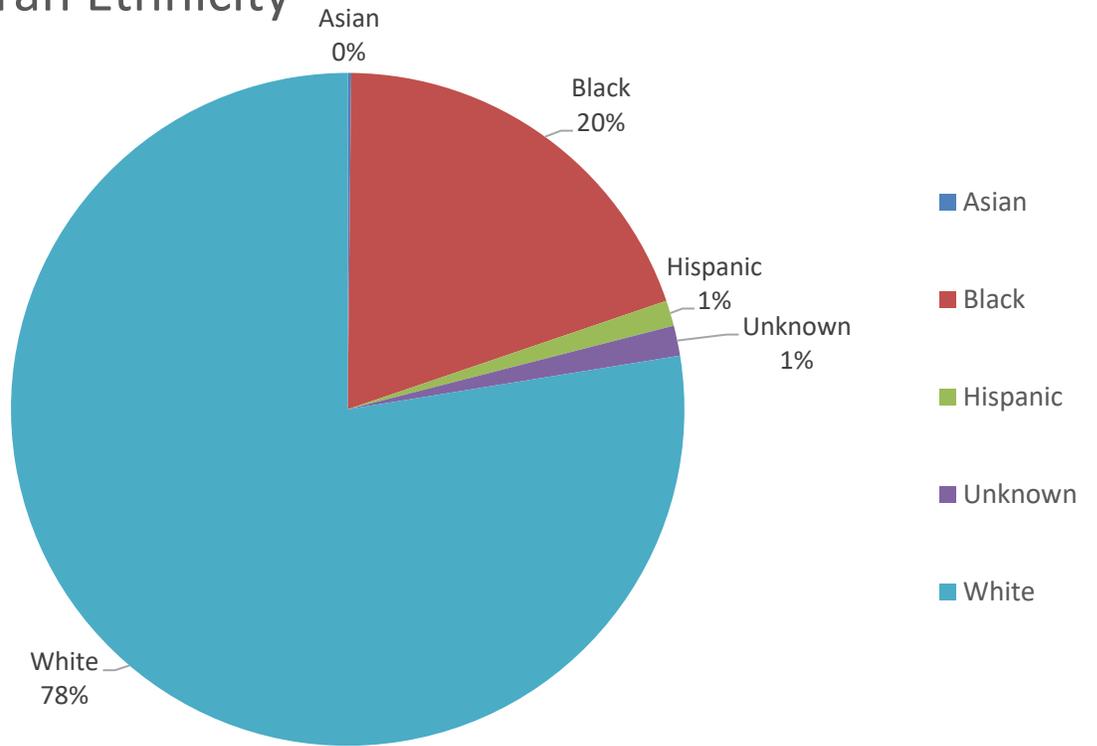
Town	
Kankakee	963
Bradley	291
Bourbonnais	734
Manteno	348
Outside Kankakee County	471
Local Small Towns	427
Homeless	2
Unknown	280
Momence	146

# Veteran War Era



War Era		OPWes1-2	1
Civilian	123	Peacetime	616
GWOT	8	Persian Gulf	600
GWOT, OEF	5	Persian Gulf, Kuwait	1
GWOT, OEF-OIF	7	Persian Gulf, Desert Shield Storm	5
GWOT, OIF	7	Persian Gulf, OEF	6
Korea	127	Persian Gulf, OEF-OIF	12
OEF	104	Persian Gulf, OIF	3
OEF-OFS	99	Unknown	359
OEF-OIF	20	Vietnam	1387
OFS	4	Vietnam, Persian Gulf, OEF	1
OIF	160	WWII	72
OIF-OFS	2		

# Veteran Ethnicity



Race	
White	2840
Black	718
Hispanic	45
Asian	6
Unknown	53

# Staff

Superintendent - Michael L. Peeken

Assist. Superintendent /Certified Veteran Advocate/ VTC Coordinator– Karen Smietanski

Senior Veteran Service Officer – Ashley Appleton

Veterans Service Officer – Amanda Sadler

Mentor Coordinator & VSO - Eric Peterson

Administrative Assistant – Ben Widdicombe

Drivers – Tim Rehmer, John Reese, and Jim Weber

Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County Commission Board

Organization	Name
AL #1019	James Wasser
AL #1019	Karl Fritzgerald
AL #1164	Larry Blanchette
AL #1164	Timothy Rehmer
AL #755	Joe Gaca
AL #755	Dan Horton
AL #766	Wayne Burgess
AL #766	Corey Norton
AL #85	Mike Pitts
AL #85	Andy Borsen
AL #408	Nic Smith
AL #408	Mark Louis Warpet
Amvets #107	Tom Page
Amvets #107	Richard Van Pelt
DAV #34	Ed Peters
DAV #34	Stanley Olenjack
MCL #1253	David Allen
MCL #1253	Stan Bobka
VFW #2857	Roger Bean
VFW #2857	Nick Monacelli
VFW #9961	Manny Quinto
VFW #9961	Michael Lockwood