

2022



**Veterans Assistance Commission of  
Kankakee County**

**Michael Peeken  
Superintendent**

## **[2022 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, 2022.*



## Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County

581 William Latham Sr. Dr. 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,

We'd like to start our year end report with our most exciting news. In November 2022 we were able to move our office to the same location as the Kankakee County VHA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). We are now located in Bourbonnais on the third floor down the hall from the CBOC. To give a little insight for you, most VA Hospitals have a row of doors with Veteran Service Officers of the "Big Six" – American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, VFW, etc. We took this idea and thought why wouldn't the VA outpatient clinics want the same thing. Service Officers located as close as possible to send their veterans to for benefit services. Not every community has a CBOC, but every community that does, should try to put a Service Officer in the nearest office possible. LaSalle County VAC moved within a softball's throw just a short time ago and has seen a great increase in claim work and service work. We will have a service officer dedicated to triaging veterans that come in for claim work straight from the clinic. Giving them the opportunity to put in an Intent to File which holds the date of claim as of that day until we can gather medical evidence and statements. We have already seen an increase in walk-in veterans. We also have a larger office with the availability to expand as the need arises. We are very excited to be here and would welcome the opportunity to show it off.

### **VETERANS FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

Veterans Assistance is available to eligible low-income veterans. 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 2022, the VAC provided some form of Financial Assistance and informational referral to veterans in need of financial help to 261 veterans/families.**

Housing	Utilities	Food / Hygiene	Medical*	Emergency	Transportation	Burial	2022 Total
\$ 28820	\$1562.22	\$775	\$ 0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$31157.22

### **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 services due to the pandemic, but an increase in the numbers of veterans/families assisting.

➤ **Utilities**

Utilities that are in the veteran's name are made by check directly to the vendor. The VAC 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 voucher/gift certificate to Aldi Foods. The voucher/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. This year we were lucky to rely heavily on community partners to supply a lot of our needs in this category. Between grants and ARPA funding we did not disburse any emergency assistance.

➤ **Transportation**

Transportation assistance is provided in the form of Metro Bus tokens and passes.

➤ **Burial**

Burial assistance is for indigent veterans that were residents of Kankakee County at the time of their passing.

### **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. **In 2022, the VAC we transported 305 veterans to and from their appointments.**

### **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 2022, the VAC assisted 511 veterans with filing VA compensation, pension and appeals claims. With 110 adjudicated claims, with \$1,840,337.00 being returned to worthy veterans.**

### **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, I am charged with tracking and ensuring ongoing education for the VTC team. In 2022, I was selected as one of AOICs trainers to help other VTC become established, get certified and/or re-certified. This was a great honor. We also had our presiding Judge Kramer retire. Our new Judge is Marlow Jones, an Air Force Veteran. He comes to us from the State's Attorney's office and was an integral part of the establishment of the VTC in Kankakee County. **In 2022, 11 veterans were referred for the program. 6 veterans were accepted into the program. We had 2 graduates successfully complete the VTC program. We currently have 11 active veterans in Veterans Treatment Court.**

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.

I am the Assistant Superintendent and am presenting this report on behalf of our Superintendent Michael Peeken. We have a great staff and continue to serve our community of veterans with the dignity and honesty they deserve. I believe our Veterans Assistance Commission is one of the best in Illinois.

**The graphs provided show that 2359 veterans/family members that came into our office for assistance. Of those coming into our office, 1999 was for paperwork assistance, 261 for Financial Assistance, 39 Homeless, and 60 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.

## **2022 HIGHLIGHTS**

- Ashley has become our Senior Veteran Service Officer and is doing phenomenal work. Our next goal with Ashley will be to start working toward Advanced Appeals. She saw some big numbers come back in claim work this year.
- David, who was hired last year, went to Mentor Boot Camp with Justice for Vets. He is now the Mentor Coordinator for VTC. He also passed his Basic Benefits course to start the process of becoming a Veteran Service Officer.
- This year with in our retro awards we had a couple of big wins. Our office won a widow Dependency and Indemnity Benefits from her Vietnam Veterans Death back to 2003. The widow had fought several times back in California, but Karen was able to see it to the finish line. The other big win was for a missed Nehmer review of bladder cancer back to 2008 which resulted in a permanent and total rating back to that date. I'm pretty sure the veteran and his wife cried for a week.
- Karen continues to work as Treasurer and Trainer for the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers.
- Karen is co-chair of the Illinois Association of County Veteran Assistance Commissions.
- This passed year, great strides were 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.
- 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. The app should roll out by February 2023.
- Continued working with the Will, Grundy, and LaSalle County VAC's on Our Patriots, Inc. to fill in the needs of veterans that cannot be met by VAC's. Three Kankakee County Veterans received grant funding to help with fixing cars, furnaces, and rental.

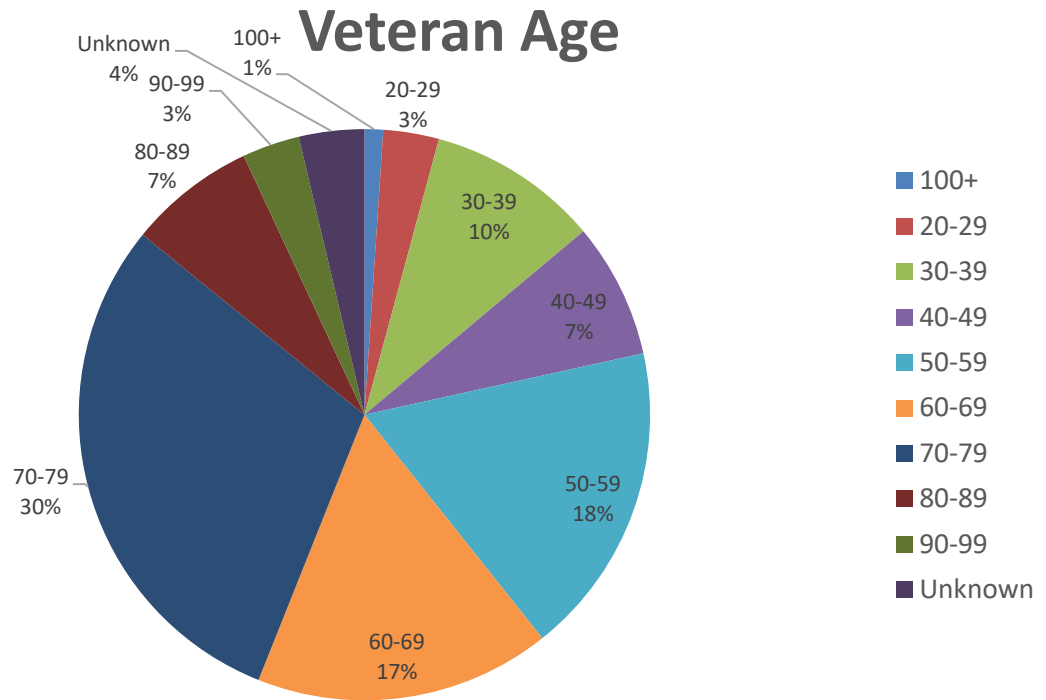
- Partnered with Catholic Charities and the SSVF grant with homeless prevention and rapid rehousing.
- Continued to work with the Prince Home Homeless shelter in Manteno.
- Continued to work with the Kankakee County Crisis Response Team
- Participated in the Central Illinois Continuum of Care
- We've been able to get back out to nursing homes and assisted living facilities for outreach and presentations on pension programs.
- Hired a new administrative assistant

## **2023 GOALS**

- Partner with the KCHA to help with the completion of the veteran permanent supportive housing unit on Washington.
- Help the VA find a suitable transitional living for homeless veterans
- Hire one or two more Service Officers as the year goes on – promote from within first
- Seek grants for dental care and eye glasses for veterans through the Illinois Vets Cash Grant lottery funds
- Purchase or find a grant for a new van for transporting veterans to save gas money when there is only one or two going to Hines
- Work on fund raising events for Our Patriots and Project Headspace and Timing
- Work on an outreach program to include service officers in the community.
- Continue Outreach to the Assisted Living and Nursing Homes as allowed during the pandemic for VA Pension presentations
- Hire an architect to look at the cost of expansion so we can plan for the future

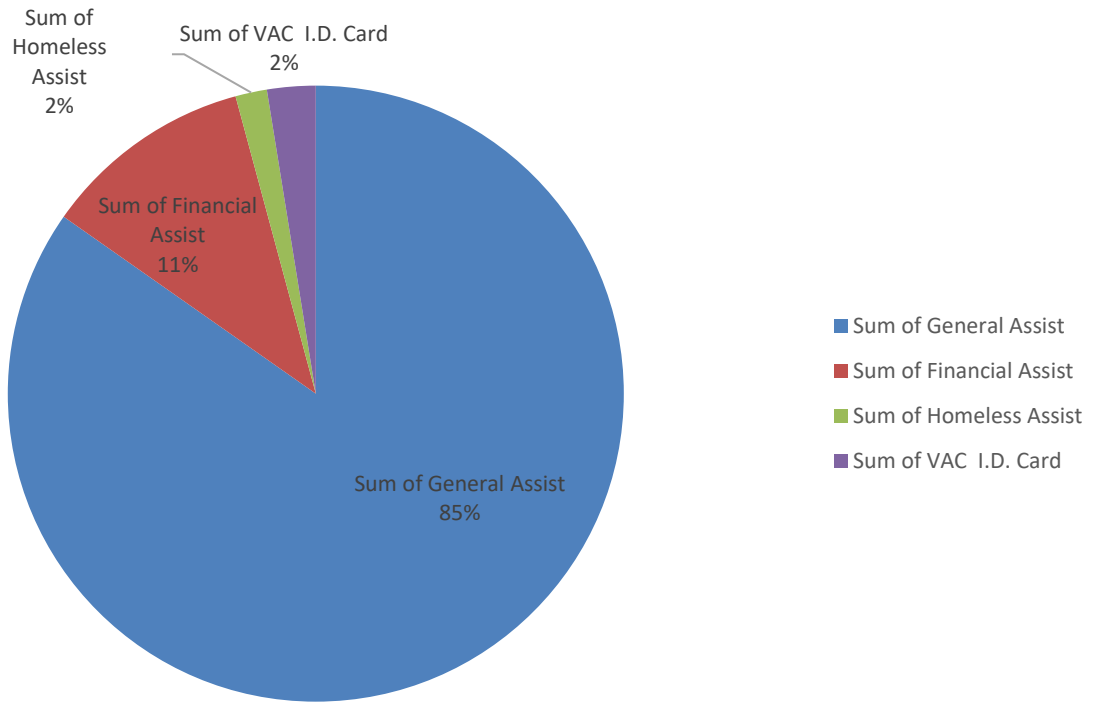
Respectfully,

Karen Smietanski  
Assistant Superintendent  
Certified Veteran Advocate



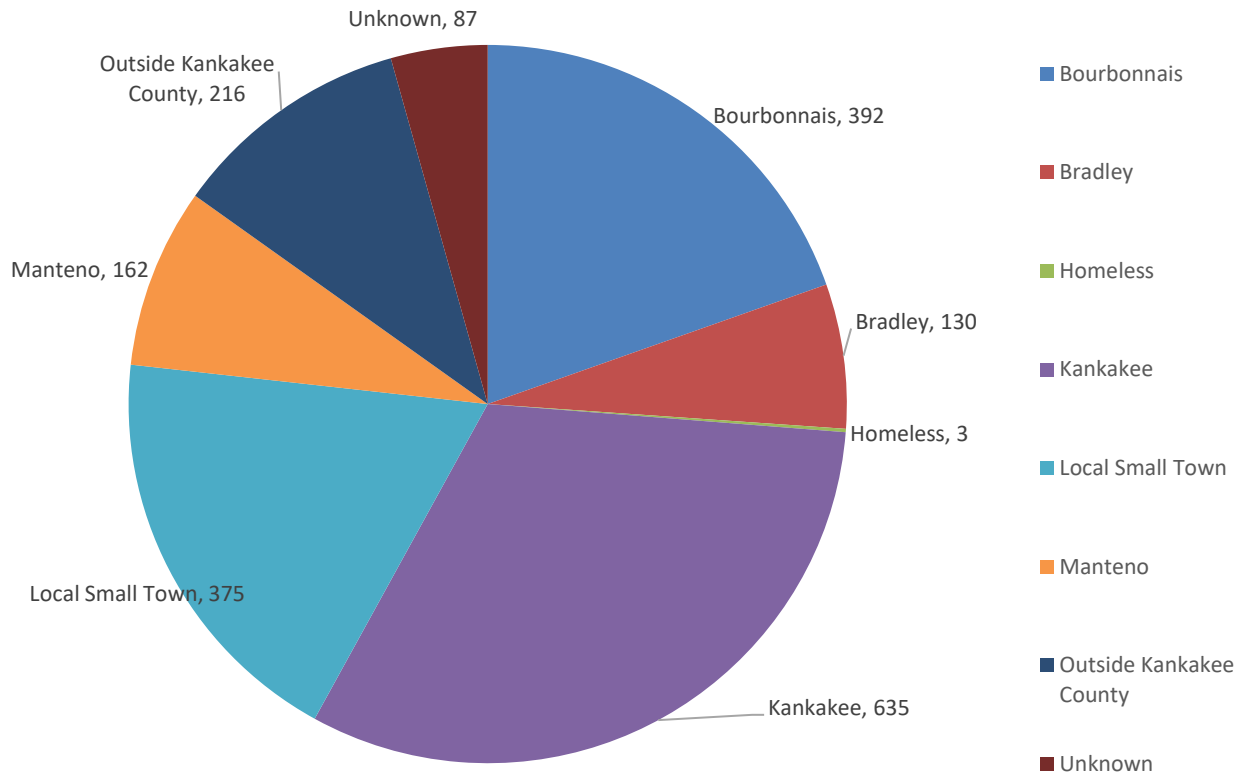
Age	
20-29	63
30-39	194
40-49	153
50-59	355
60-69	335
70-79	596
80-89	144
90-99	65
100+	21
Unknown	74

# Assistance



Assistance	
General	1999
Financial	261
Homeless	39
Photo ID	60
Processed Documents	3367

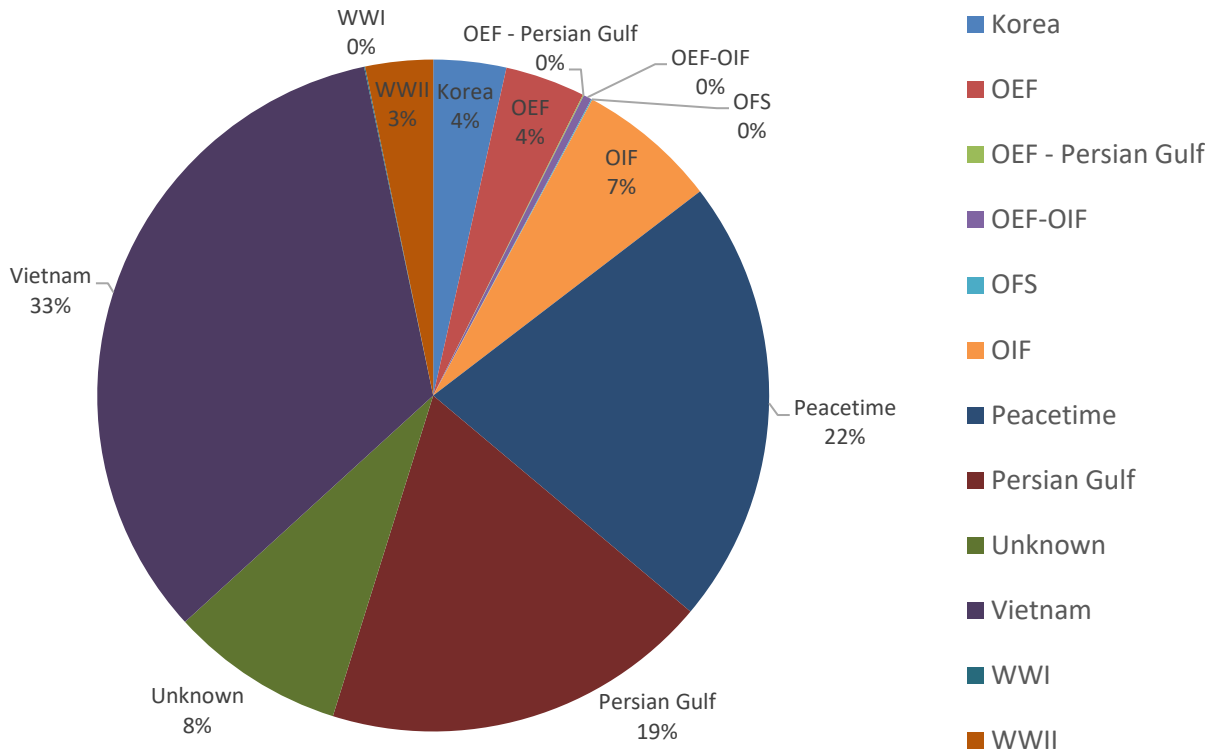
# Veteran Location



Town	
Kankakee	635
Bradley	130
Bourbonnais	392
Manteno	162
Outside Kankakee County	216
Local Small Towns	375
Homeless	3
Unknown	87

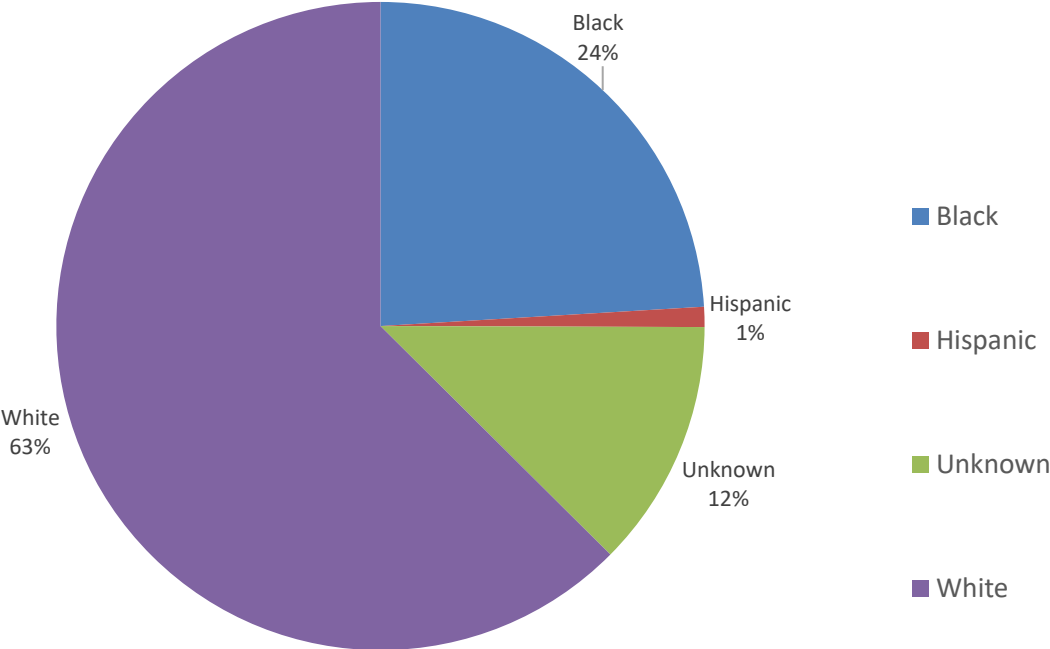


# Veteran War Era



War Era	
WWI	1
WWII	65
Korea	70
Vietnam	669
Persian Gulf	374
OEF - Persian Gulf	1
OIF-OEF	135
OFS	1
OIF-OEF	8
Persian Gulf	374
OEF	77
Peacetime	430
Unknown	168

# Veteran Ethnicity



Race	
White	1251
Black	481
Hispanic	20
Unknown	248

# Staff

Superintendent - Michael Peeken

Assistant Superintendent /Certified Veteran Advocate – Karen Smietanski

Senior Veteran Service Officer – Ashley Appleton

Mentor Coordinator - David McCleery

Administrative Assistant – Amanda Sadler

Drivers – Tim Rehmer, John Reese, and Jim Weber

Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County Commission Board

Organization	Name
<a href="#">AL #1019</a>	<a href="#">James Wasser</a>
<a href="#">AL #1164</a>	<a href="#">Bruce Wood</a>
<a href="#">AL #1164</a>	<a href="#">Larry Blanchette</a>
<a href="#">AL #1164</a>	<a href="#">Jim Grimes</a>
<a href="#">AL # 1164</a>	<a href="#">Timothy Rehmer</a>
<a href="#">AL #755</a>	<a href="#">Joe Gaca</a>
<a href="#">AL #755</a>	<a href="#">Dan Horton</a>
<a href="#">AL #766</a>	<a href="#">Lallo Kirk</a>
<a href="#">AL #766</a>	<a href="#">Corey Norton</a>
<a href="#">AL #85</a>	<a href="#">Mike Pitts</a>
<a href="#">AL #408</a>	<a href="#">Nic Smith</a>
<a href="#">Amvets #107</a>	<a href="#">Richard Van Pelt</a>
<a href="#">Amvets #107</a>	<a href="#">Tom Page</a>
<a href="#">Amvets #113</a>	<a href="#">John Fulton</a>
<a href="#">DAV #34</a>	<a href="#">Ed Peters</a>
<a href="#">DAV #34</a>	<a href="#">Ken Brooks</a>
<a href="#">DAV #34</a>	<a href="#">Stanley Olenjack</a>
<a href="#">MCL #1253</a>	<a href="#">David Allen</a>
<a href="#">MCL #1253</a>	<a href="#">Joe Mayfield</a>
<a href="#">MCL #1253</a>	<a href="#">Rich Kuyper</a>
<a href="#">MCL #1253</a>	<a href="#">Skip Myers</a>
<a href="#">MCL #1254</a>	<a href="#">Stan Bobka</a>
<a href="#">VFW #2857</a>	<a href="#">Nick Monacelli</a>
<a href="#">VFW #2857</a>	<a href="#">Roger Bean</a>
<a href="#">VFW #9961</a>	<a href="#">Manny Quinto</a>
<a href="#">VFW #9961</a>	<a href="#">Michael Lockwood</a>
<a href="#">VFW #9961</a>	<a href="#">Tom Nelson</a>
<a href="#">NABVETS</a>	<a href="#">Sam Peyton</a>
<a href="#">SVA</a>	<a href="#">Quante Grant</a>