

2024



**Veterans Assistance Commission of
Kankakee County**

**Eric W Peterson
Superintendent**

[2024 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, 2024.



Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County

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December 30, 2024

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

Dear Governor Pritzker,

This past year our office has been thankful to experience significant growth and progress which has led to an overall better experience for the veteran community as a whole, which has been noted by members of your staff to include Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Director Terry Prince. These successes are mostly illustrated through this report, but there are several aspects of this success that cannot be properly conveyed without some additional context which I will provide here.

You may recall that in November 2022, 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 others across the Nation that has a true one stop shop for veterans. Veterans in Kankakee County can take care of their healthcare in Suite 301 and talk to an Accredited Service Officer in Suite 302 about the additional benefits they may be owed. There have been numerous situations in which our offices being right next to each other has provided opportunities to better serve our veterans and that can be confirmed by our office, the CBOC, and our veterans. We hope through these continued efforts, that Kankakee County can serve as a beacon of hope for veterans, VACs, and treatment providers alike across this great state.

This year we also added an additional benefit for our veterans. One of the four VA contractors who offer Compensation and Pension exams began to see veterans in our office a few times a week. Because we are in a rural area, veterans would normally have to travel an hour or more to have a Compensation and Pension exam done. Now, we give them the ability to have many of those exams done right in the comfort of our office. In 2024, the QTC examiner saw 229 clients in our office, which is another huge win for veterans of Kankakee County and the surrounding rural communities who once believed that they were overlooked in terms of care due to their choice of where they call home.

Thanks to your help and support, we are able to help ensure our veterans are proud to come from this community and this state, which is one of the best ways we can truly tell a veteran “thank you.”

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 2024, the VAC provided some form of Financial Assistance and informational referral to veterans in need of financial help to 236 veterans/families.** This year the VACKC saw a decrease in overall financial assistance due to 3 veterans getting substantial VA benefits. Two veterans received retroactive disability awards of over \$50,000 each and are both getting monthly benefits of over \$4000. The third veteran that received monthly VA pension benefits. All three veterans no longer receive VAC financial assistance.

Housing	Utilities	Food / Hygiene	Vets Court	Emergency	Transportation	Burial	2023 Total
\$ 23511.10	\$2080.49	\$1000	\$148.97	\$93.00	\$1797.70	\$0	\$28631.26

➤ **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.

➤ **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 purchased a smaller passenger van last year. All transportation costs are due to fuel and maintenance. We currently still have a Rural transportation 12 passenger bus, but it was used less due to the fuel costs. **In 2024, the VAC transported 306 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 2024, the VAC assisted veterans with filing 6783 forms. With 240 claims processed for benefits, bringing in \$3,804,363.94 returned to worthy veterans served by our office. Please see the attached spreadsheets to see our full growth over the years.**

VETERANS TREATMENT COURT

The VAC provides an important role in the Veterans Treatment Court of the 21st Judicial Circuit by acting as a portal into the court and linking veterans to their VA benefits. As the VTC Court Coordinator for the 21st 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. **The Administrative Offices of Illinois Courts (AOIC) re-certified our VTC in 2024. In 2024, we graduated 2 veterans from the program.**

IN CLOSING

With our office being a crucial 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.

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

- Appointed a new Superintendent, Eric Peterson.
- This year continued to be busier than ever. The growth shows in our numbers, in claims processed, number of veterans in our office and the dollars brought back to veterans in their claims. The chart attached shows the amount of growth since 2012 in claims adjudicated by the VA and amount of dollars veterans received.
- Increased our outreach capabilities by having our new VSO set up off site locations in area American Legions and at the Liberty Lodge. This allows veterans to have access

throughout the county to our office services while letting our veterans know that if you cannot come to us, that we will come to you.

- Karen Smietanski has been a trainer with the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO) since 2017. She was recently appointed as the Director of Education for the NACVSO due to her experience and knowledge.
- Karen is co-chair of the Education Committee for the Illinois Association of County Veteran Assistance Commissions (IACVAC).
- VA claims adjudication of three of our veterans come off of our financial assistance, permanently.
- Hosted a resource fair within the building that included a small claims clinic and VA and community resources.

2025 GOALS

- Expand office space in our current location.
- Increase Staff to be able to more expeditiously serve veterans.
- Hold a claims clinic within our community to include everything the VA has to offer.
- Increase our outreach services.
- Apply for grants for our Veterans Treatment Court.
- Increase awareness to the community of our services offered.
- Ashley Appleton, our Senior VSO to begin the Certified Veteran Advocate classes.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E W Peterson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Eric W. Peterson
Superintendent

Staff

Superintendent and VTC Mentor Coordinator – Eric Peterson

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

Senior Veteran Service Officer – Ashley Appleton

Veterans Service Officer – Tyler Watson

Administrative Assistant – Christine Senesac

Drivers – Jim Weber and David O’Leary

Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County Commission Board

Organization	Name
<u>AL #1019</u>	<u>James Wasser</u>
<u>AL #1019</u>	<u>Karl Fritzgerald</u>
<u>AL #1164</u>	<u>Larry Blanchette</u>
<u>AL #1164</u>	<u>Mark Straughn</u>
<u>AL #755</u>	<u>Joe Gaca</u>
<u>AL #755</u>	<u>Dan Horton</u>
<u>AL #766</u>	<u>Wayne Burgess</u>
<u>AL #766</u>	<u>Corey Norton</u>
<u>AL # 795</u>	<u>Dennis Pankey</u>
<u>AL #85</u>	<u>John McGarey</u>
<u>AL #85</u>	<u>Daniel Guimond</u>
<u>AL #408</u>	<u>Nic Smith</u>
<u>AL #408</u>	<u>Mark Louis Warpet</u>
<u>Amvets #107</u>	<u>Tom Page</u>
<u>Amvets #107</u>	<u>Tony Just</u>
<u>DAV #34</u>	<u>Ed Peters</u>
<u>DAV #34</u>	
<u>MCL #1253</u>	<u>David Allen</u>
<u>MCL #1253</u>	<u>Richard Kuyper</u>
<u>VFW #2857</u>	<u>Roger Bean</u>
<u>VFW #2857</u>	<u>Nick Monacelli</u>
<u>VFW #7535</u>	<u>Raymond Jacobsen</u>
<u>VFW #7535</u>	<u>Dennis Horn</u>
<u>VFW #9961</u>	<u>Manny Quinto</u>
<u>VFW #9961</u>	<u>Michael Lockwood</u>
<u>NABVETS</u>	<u>Sam Peyton</u>

Claims SC/Pen/DIC/Appeal

Year	#	Monthly	Annual	Retro
2012	11	\$ 12,733.00	\$ 152,796.00	\$ 93,633.00
2013	36	\$ 36,407.00	\$ 436,880.00	\$ 312,094.00
2014	62	\$ 79,539.00	\$ 954,469.00	\$ 510,811.00
2015	85	\$ 133,337.00	\$ 1,586,168.88	\$ 987,476.00
2016	100	\$ 132,120.00	\$ 1,585,437.00	\$ 906,929.00
2017	121	\$ 161,193.00	\$ 1,934,310.60	\$ 923,254.00
2018	108	\$ 153,759.00	\$ 1,845,103.37	\$ 987,880.00
2019	130	\$ 102,933.11	\$ 1,232,245.32	\$ 461,429.02
2020	143	\$ 115,153.43	\$ 1,381,841.16	\$ 1,313,426.58
2021	228	\$ 183,457.17	\$ 2,110,653.48	\$ 844,632.96
2022	201	\$ 171,218.48	\$ 2,054,621.80	\$ 1,610,345.90
2023	351	\$ 315,054.05	\$ 3,780,648.60	\$ 2,033,301.06
2024	402	\$ 438,114.54	\$ 5,257,374.48	\$ 2,942,322.40
		\$ 2,035,018.78	\$ 24,312,549.69	\$ 13,927,534.92

Month	General Assistance	Financial	Homeless	ID Cards	Bus/Van	Monthly Service Totals	Monthly Forms Processed
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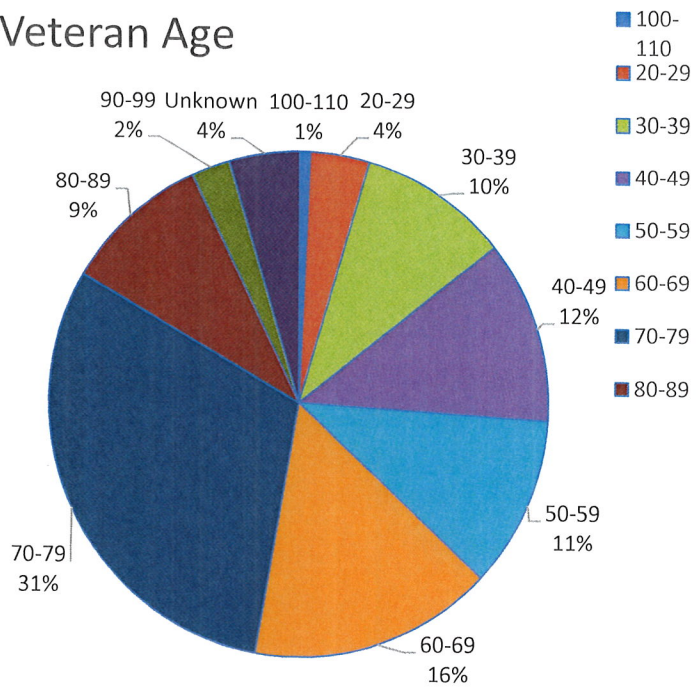
**Veterans Assistance Commission
Monthly/Year to Date Veteran Service Assistance**

2024 FY (Dec - Nov) Totals.

Month	General Assistance	Financial	Homeless	ID Cards	Bus/Van	Monthly Service Totals	Monthly Forms Processed
December (23)	292	17	6	6	5 / 12	317	540
January (24)	317	26	10	0	5 / 18	373	585
February	317	22	12	3	2 / 12	345	514
March	324	22	1	4	7 / 15	372	511
April	306	19	2	6	0 / 14	347	445
May	294	12	9	2	7 / 18	291	529
June	291	18	6	1	4 / 15	335	637
July	365	22	6	5	5/25	428	823
August	338	18	11	1	0 / 25	393	585
September	311	19	3	3	5 / 25	366	476
October	318	23	1	1	4 / 29	343	546
November	253	18	2	4	4/12	277	592
Year to Date Service Totals							Yrly Frms Total
2024 Totals:	3726	236	69	36	219	4187	6783

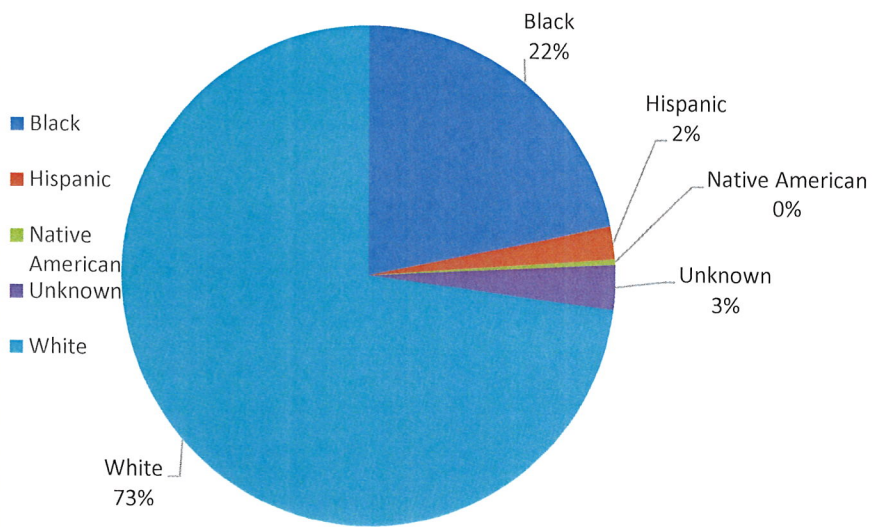
2017 Totals:	2589	221	54	345		3209	
2018 Totals:	2403	197	58	229		2887	
2019 Totals:	2128	243	44	182		2597	
2020 Totals:	1523	129	60	108		1820	2316
2021 Totals:	1813	202	63	75		2153	2473
2022 Totals:	1999	261	39	60		2359	3367
2023 Totals:	3729	222	55	31		4037	5692

Veteran Age



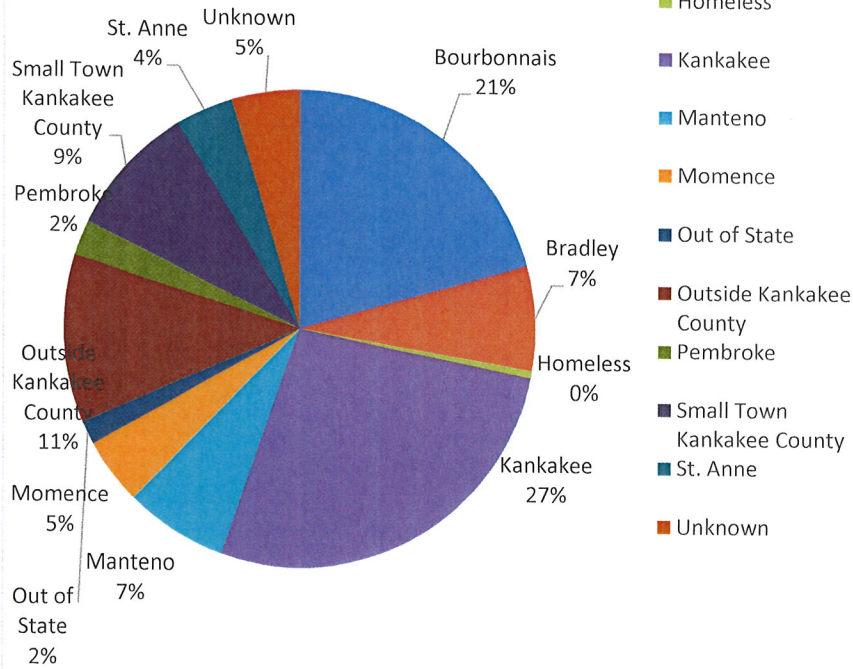
Age Range	Count
Unknown	171
20-29	143
30-39	364
40-49	438
50-59	406
60-69	590
70-79	1141
80-89	356
90-99	93
100-110	24

Veteran Ethnicity



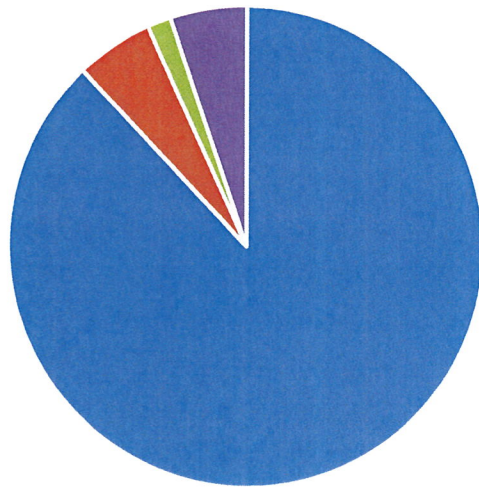
Race	Count
Black	808
Hispanic	79
Native American	13
White	2719
Unknown	106

Veteran Town



Town	Count
Bourbonnais	769
Bradley	264
Homeless	18
Kankakee	1010
Manteno	262
Momence	168
Out of State	60
Outside Kankakee County	424
Pembroke	90
Small Town Kankakee County	337
St. Anne	149
Unknown	175

Veteran Town



- Bourbonnais
- Bradley
- Homeless
- Kankakee
- Manteno
- Momence
- Out of State
- Outside Kankakee County
- Pembroke
- Small Town Kankakee County
- St. Anne
- Unknown

Assistance	Count
General	3726
Financial	236
Homeless	69
V.A.C. ID Card	36