

**2025**



**Veterans Assistance Commission of  
Kankakee County**

**Eric W. Peterson  
Superintendent**

## **[2025 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, 2025.*

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## Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County

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December 24, 2025

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

Dear Governor Pritzker,

It is my privilege to present you with the annual report of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County (VACKC) pursuant to Chapter 330, Part 45, Section 8 of the Illinois Compiled Statutes.

The VACKC provides services in the following categories:

1. Veteran Advocacy
2. Veteran Financial Assistance
3. Community Partnerships

Out of the 102 counties in Illinois, our rural community is proud to sit in the top 20% of the state in terms of veteran population, with 5,741 veterans. In 2025 we were thankful to provide support to more than 3,453 veterans, dependents, and survivors, resulting in **monthly and retroactive benefits totaling \$3,895,397.03**. This means that our Commission has, in effect, brought in over five times its budget in new monies to Kankakee County during the fiscal year. These new benefits represent an economic impact to Kankakee County of **\$10,177,147.78**, though this amount does not consider money that the VACKC has helped our veterans save by assisting them in accessing their VA Healthcare.

Beyond direct benefits advocacy, VACKC has leveraged strategic partnerships to expand access for veterans to nutrient-dense food, non-pharmaceutical chronic pain management options, direct engagement with legislators, and coordinated pathways out of homelessness. Through this work, VACKC continues to serve as a critical access point for veterans and their families, promoting stability, securing benefits, and delivering measurable outcomes that strengthen the overall well-being of the veteran community in Kankakee County.

Thank you for your support of our county's Veterans. Please feel free to contact me with any questions, comments, or concerns.

Respectfully,

Eric W. Peterson

Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County Superintendent

# **Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County Delegates and Alternates 2025**

The VACKC Commission Board is made up of some of the most passionate and hardest working veterans from around our community. Our Commission board closely monitors the activities of the VACKC with resolute judgment and their support to our office and mission is invaluable.

**Chairman David Allen** – Marine Corps League Post 1253  
**Vice-Chairman Dan Horton** – Manteno American Legion Post 755  
**Delegate Carey Hall** – Aroma Park American Legion Post 1019  
**Alternate Jim Wasser** – Aroma Park American Legion Post 1019  
**Delegate Mark Straughn** – St. George American Legion Post 1164  
**Alternate Jim Grimes** – St. George American Legion Post 1164  
**Alternate Joe Gaca** – Manteno American Legion Post 755  
**Delegate Wayne Burgess** – Bradley American Legion Post 766  
**Alternate Corey Norton** – Bradley American Legion Post 766  
**Delegate Dennis Pankey** – Herscher American Legion Post 795  
**Alternate Tim Cmielowicz** – Herscher American Legion Post 795  
**Delegate John McGarey** – Kankakee American Legion Post 85  
**Alternate Daniel Guimond** – Kankakee American Legion Post 85  
**Delegate Nic Smith** – Chebanse American Legion Post 408  
**Alternate Mark Louis Warpet** – Chebanse American Legion Post 408  
**Delegate Tom Page** – American Veterans Post 107  
**Alternate Tony Just** – American Veterans Post 107  
**Delegate Ken Brooks** – Disabled American Veterans Post 34  
**Alternate Mike Peeken** – Disabled American Veterans Post 34  
**Alternate Willie Berry** – Marine Corps League Post 1253  
**Delegate Roger Bean** – Veterans of Foreign Wars Kankakee Post 2857  
**Alternate Nick Monacelli** – Veterans of Foreign Wars Kankakee Post 2857  
**Delegate Raymond Jacobsen** – Veterans of Foreign Wars Momence Post 7535  
**Alternate Dennis Horn** – Veterans of Foreign Wars Momence Post 7535  
**Delegate Manny Quinto** – Veterans of Foreign Wars Bourbonnais Post 9961  
**Alternate Michael Lockwood** – Veterans of Foreign Wars Bourbonnais Post 9961  
**Delegate Sam Peyton** – National Association for Black Veterans, Inc., Pembroke Chapter 84



# The Mission of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County

*“With mutual respect, dignity and acceptance, through innovative and collaborative services, the Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County will provide tools for positive life changes to veterans and their families.”*

This mission is accomplished through three main areas:

1. Veteran Advocacy
2. Veteran Financial Assistance
3. Community Partnerships

## **Staff:**

The staff of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County is currently comprised of: Eric Peterson, Superintendent; Karen Smietanski, Assistant Superintendent; Ty Watson, Veteran Service Officer (VSO); Christina Senesac, Administrative Assistant; Michael Peeken, Administrative Assistant and former Superintendent; Jim Webber, Driver; and Roger Bean, Volunteer.

The VACKC office grew this past year in terms of both education and teamwork. Ty and Christina both celebrated their first full year with the VAC in April of 2025 and strengthened their educational foundations by finishing the National Association of County Veteran Service Officer's (NACVSO) Basic Benefits class and becoming accredited VSOs. Having our Administrative Assistant take and pass this class will allow her to be more active at our front desk in being able to triage, intake, and answer veterans' questions that would have previously needed to go to a VSO or potentially require a scheduled appointment at a later date. This will allow our VSOs to focus on their specific case load and claim work without interruption, while creating a more efficient process for the veteran client. Ty has taken on Outreach responsibilities in addition to his VSO work and posted at multiple locations across our county to ensure Veterans who may have travel issues have better opportunities to speak with a VSO and have their questions answered.

Karen Smietanski has also been asked to serve as the Director of Education for the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers in charge of education for every county VSO that registers with NACVSO. Her education background and sixteen years of experience in veteran service officer work is so extensive that she was also asked by NACVSO to travel and train 24 VSOs for Native American Pueblos, Tribes and Nations in New Mexico. Being that the American Indian population has traditionally experienced more serious health issues and barriers to healthcare compared to those of other races or ethnicities, the VACKC continues to serve as a leader in making a positive impact on the veteran community at large in addition to the veterans in our county. Karen has also been elected to serve as the Co-Education Chair of the Illinois Association of County Veteran Assistance Commissions with LaSalle County Veteran Assistance Commission Assistant Superintendent Lissa Olson.

Looking into Fiscal Year 2026, VACKC would like to add one VSO who specializes in outreach and social services, and one part-time administrative assistant. Based on the needs that we have seen in our office, adding these two positions will add significant value to the service we currently offer our veteran community.

### **What the Community is Saying:**

*"A great place for our brothers and sisters that served this country. Eric and Ty and the rest of the staff are straightforward, genuine, and honest people. If you're a veteran or have family and friends who served, give them a call or visit them. They WILL help you as best they can."* – Veteran via Google Review

*"Excellent group of people there they are very helpful and very kind."* – Veteran via Google Review

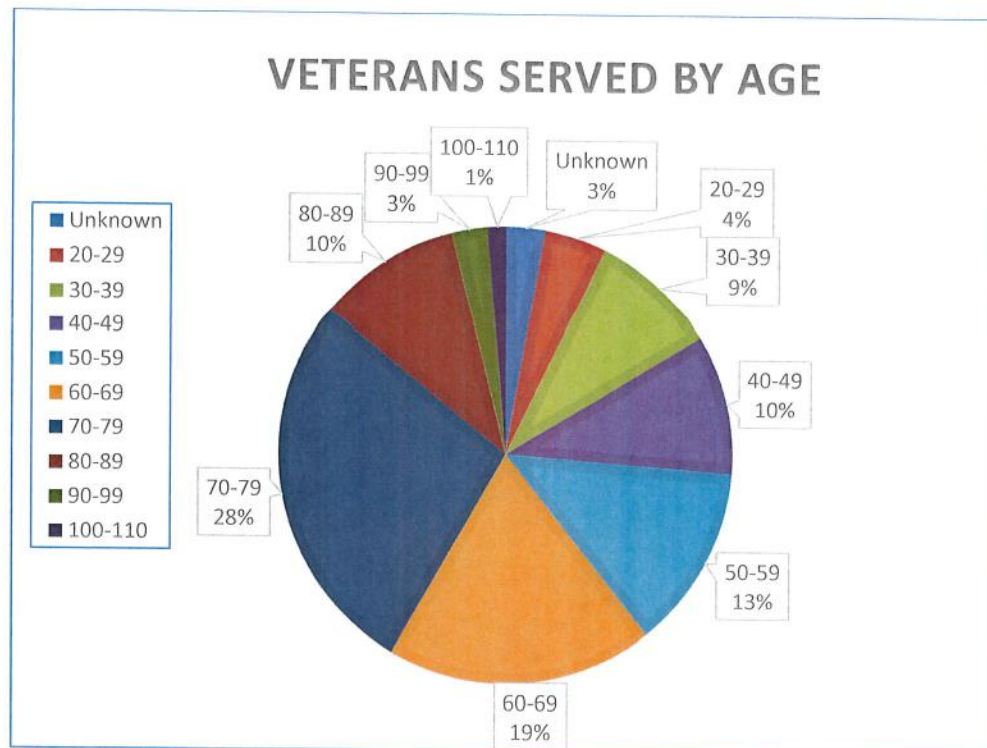
*"I should have taken advantage of the help they provided a long time ago."* – Veteran via Google Review

*"They have so many resources for veterans."* – Veteran's Mother via Facebook

# Veteran Advocacy

## 1. Advocating for Veteran Benefits (Claims Assistance)

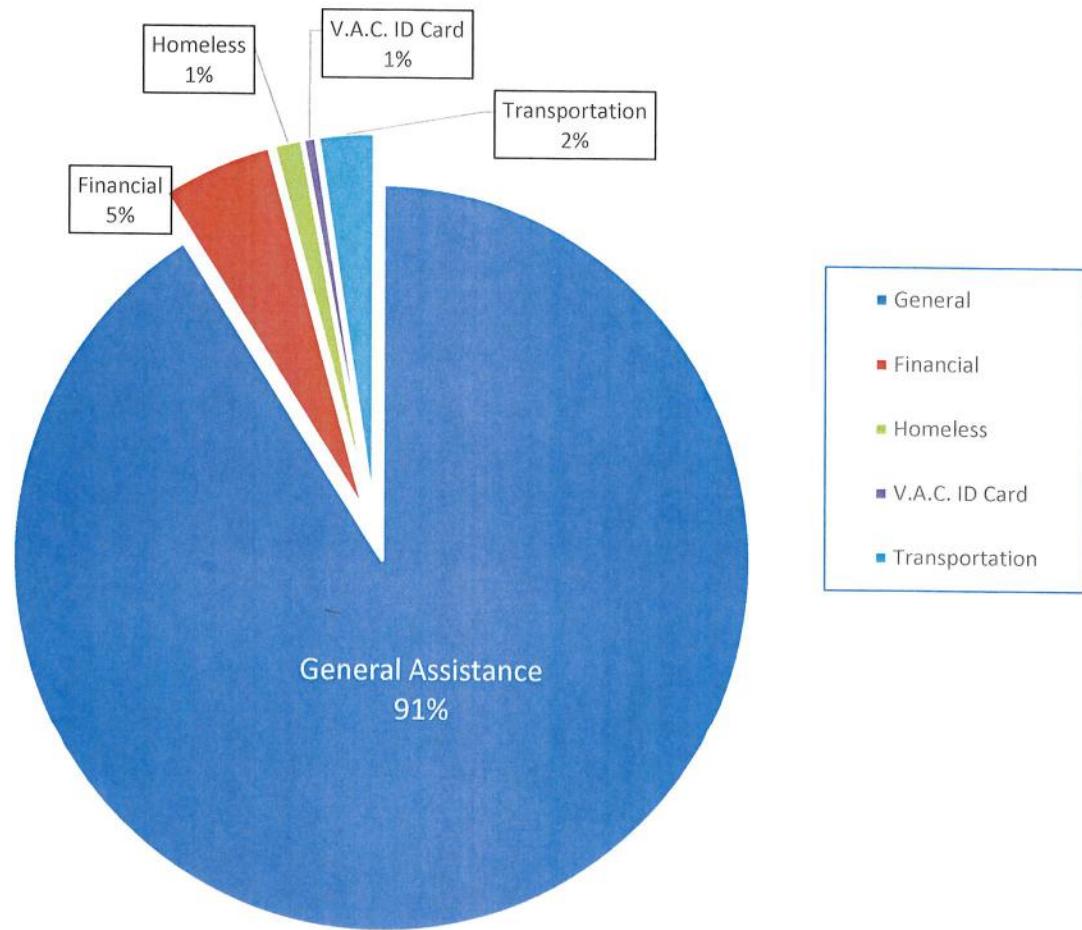
The Veterans Service Officers (VSO's) for the VACKC are recognized by the VA General Council to represent veterans all the way to the VA Board of Appeals. VACKC VSOs assist the veteran community with Disability, Pension, Special Monthly Compensation, Appeals, and VA Healthcare claims. In 2025, VACKC assisted veterans with filing 5824 forms, and processed 1,210 claims, bringing \$3,895,397.03 in return to the deserving veterans served by our office. Between our advocacy efforts and our office being on the same floor as our remote Veteran Health Administration Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) we were also able to welcome home 290 new veterans in 2025 that had never been registered with our office before. This represents an average of 24 new veterans per month, which is a yearly increase of 32 veterans compared to last year's total of 258.



Age Range (In Years)	Number of Veterans Served
Unknown	95
20-29	152
30-39	318
40-49	342
50-59	451
60-69	655
70-79	951
80-89	353
90-99	87
100-110	47



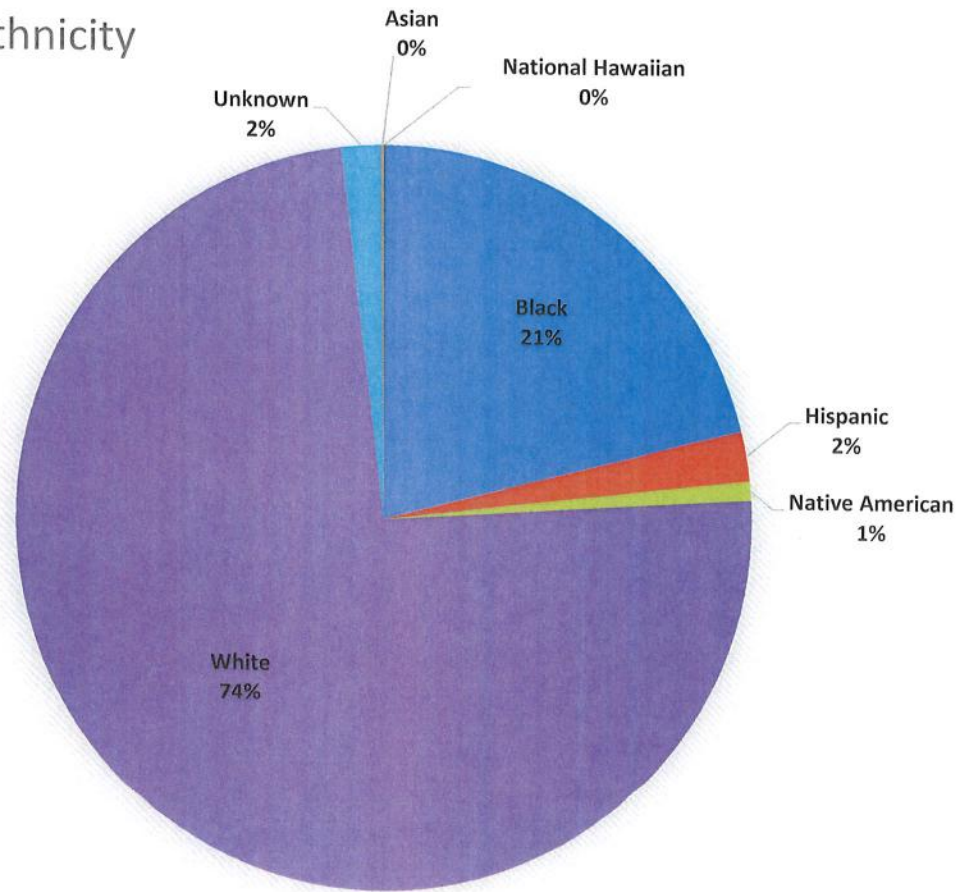
## Types of Assistance Provided



Assistance Type	Number of Veterans Served
General	3452
Financial	185
Homeless	47
V.A.C. ID Card	21
Transportation	93

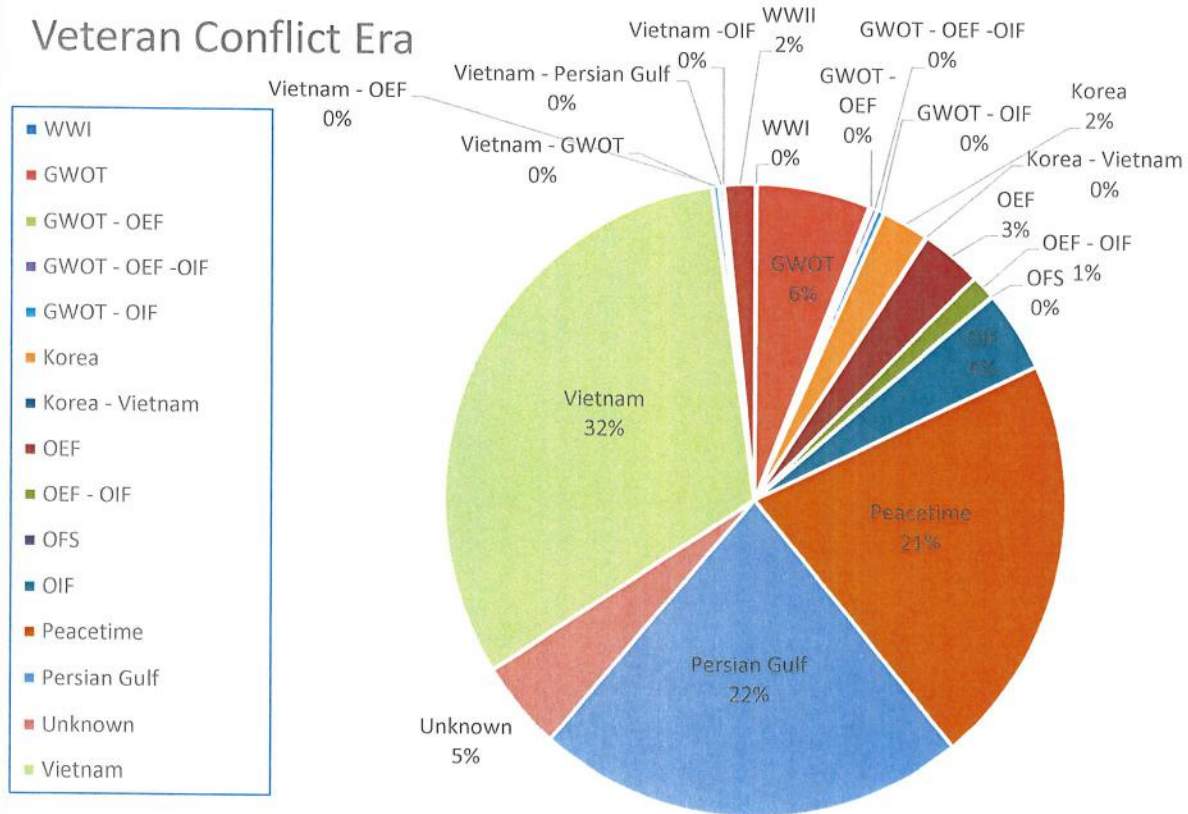


## Veteran Ethnicity



Veteran Ethnicity	Number of Veterans Served
Black	727
Hispanic	74
Native American	29
White	2554
Unknown	61
Asian	3
National Hawaiian	4

## Veteran Conflict Era



Veteran Conflict Era	Number of Veterans Served
WWI	2
GWOT	203
GWOT - OEF	6
GWOT - OEF -OIF	9
GWOT - OIF	13
Korea	85
Korea - Vietnam	2
OEF	109
OEF - OIF	44
OFS	1
OIF	144
Peacetime	727
Persian Gulf	773
Unknown	156
Vietnam	1099
Vietnam - GWOT	1
Vietnam - OEF	11
Vietnam - Persian Gulf	8
Vietnam -OIF	1
WWII	57



## **2. Advocating for Homeless Veterans**

Through conversations with the Hines VA Homeless Prevention Team and Midwest Shelters for Homeless Veterans, VACKC has made a concentrated effort in battling veteran homelessness. These efforts are done by working with organizations that encounter, provide support for, and/or need education on how to identify and assist homeless veterans.

VACKC received permission from Hines VA to set up a monthly call between Hines VA, Midwest Shelters for Homeless Veterans, and VACKC to discuss all homeless veterans any organization is tracking in the Kankakee County area. VACKC spearheaded this effort so that our office can ensure that we are providing all necessary support to any homeless veteran in our county and that there are none slipping through the cracks.

VACKC has also extended outreach initiatives to begin working with local hotels to educate them in our services and how to try to better identify homeless veterans as we have begun to see referrals come in from these sources.

After several years of work, the Kankakee County Housing Authority (KCHA) opened the Liberty Lodge on 210 South Washington Avenue in Kankakee, Illinois with the support of VACKC. The facility is a 14 – “efficiency” unit permanent supportive housing project for veterans, where the VACKC has volunteered to partner with the KCHA to provide supportive services to the veterans who reside at the Lodge, and otherwise may not have had access to such resources. Through community partnerships, VACKC was able to secure pastoral care, counseling, representatives from Hines VA Hospital, a VSO from our office, and others to set up a consistent, reoccurring schedule of support at the Liberty Lodge to ensure the veterans residing there are receiving the support that they need. VACKC has assisted BEAR Construction in throwing a fundraiser for the Liberty Lodge to build a gazebo in the backyard and to further support beautification efforts to continue to build the veteran residents’ pride in the establishment, which VACKC believes will contribute to the overall success of the veterans residing there. While veterans can stay at the Liberty Lodge as long as they would like, we have already had one veteran move out and get an apartment in our community because VACKC was able to assist the veteran in obtaining their VA benefits while residing at the Liberty Lodge. There are currently 13 residents at the Liberty Lodge with one more waiting approval from KCHA.

VACKC also participates in the Kankakee County Continuum of Care meetings each month to strengthen coordination across the local homeless response system. Through this engagement, the Commission both educates community partners on identifying and referring homeless veterans to VACKC services and deepens collaboration with organizations that provide complementary support, including Prairie State Legal, Harbor House, The Salvation Army, and Kankakee County Community Services, Inc., and others.

## **3. Advocating for Justice-Involved Veterans**

The VAC provides an important role in the Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) 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, Assistant Superintendent Smietanski is charged with tracking program functions and ensuring ongoing education for the VTC team. The VACKC also provides Superintendent Peterson to serve as the Mentor Coordinator to ensure all veterans participating in the program have a veteran mentor that they can look to for support when they need it most. In 2025, we graduated one veteran from the program. We currently have six active participants with four more in our “under-consideration” assessment phase. VACKC has also connected local organizations to include Thresholds into the VTC program to ensure that veterans who may not have access to care through the VA can use local resources to continue

strengthening the resolve that they need to complete this arduous program. VACKC has also assisted in finding our veterans in VTC local jobs, local support groups, and emergency financial assistance when looking into more intensive treatment options that would take the veteran away from home.

#### **4. Advocating for Veterans to Speak with Their Legislators**

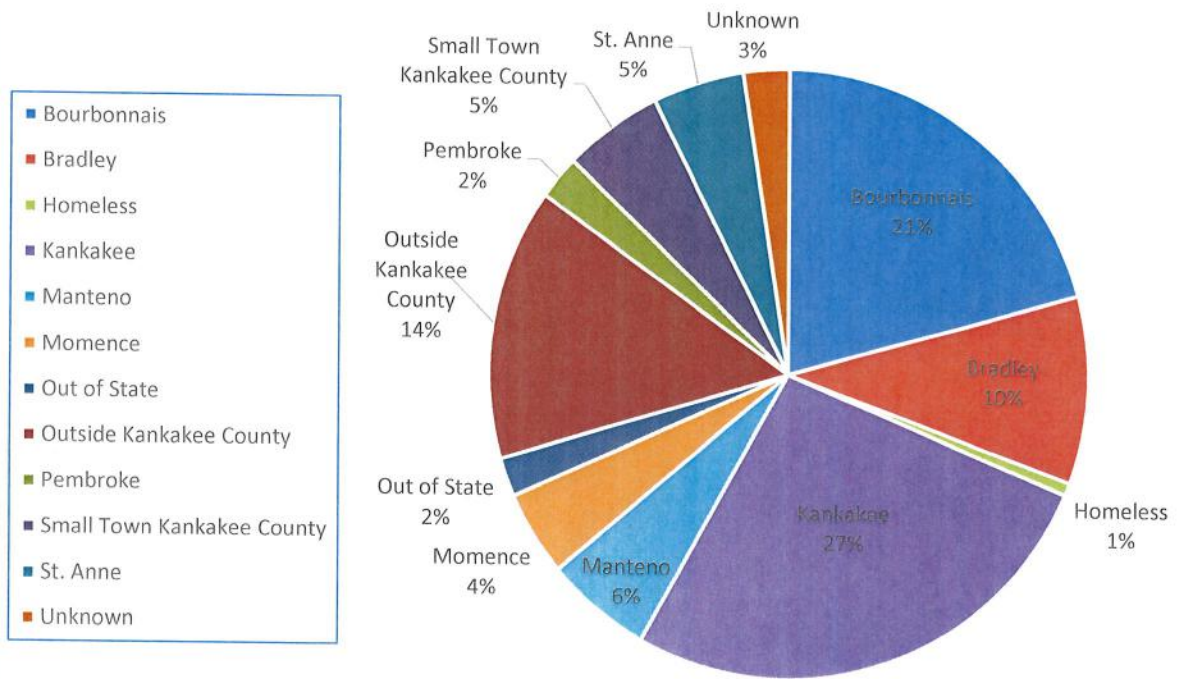
In 2025 VACKC has been thankful to welcome Aaron Craig from Congresswoman Robin Kelly's office for the Illinois 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District, to the VACKC office almost every month. By doing so, our office can ensure that veterans in Kankakee County can have Congressional support with their VA Benefits, military records requests, discharge corrections and upgrades, retiree pension issues, military funeral assistance, Social Security and Disability, Medicare/Medicaid, passports, and more. In addition to this, the VACKC Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, and Commission Board Chair are invited to, and regularly attend, quarterly meetings for Representative Jackie Haas's 79<sup>th</sup> District Veterans Advisory Council meetings. This gives our office an opportunity to communicate the priorities and concerns of our veteran community to Representative Haas's team to build a stronger 79<sup>th</sup> District in terms of veteran support.

#### **5. Advocating for Veterans in Need of Transportation**

Transportation continues to be a barrier for veterans in rural communities seeking care. While having a recently renovated CBOC with expanding services, many veterans in our community still need transportation assistance for care only offered at Hines VA Medical Center. In 2025, the VAC transported 327 veterans to and from their appointments at Hines VA. All but 9 veterans were able to be transported by the VACKC van, with the aforementioned 9 veterans utilizing the VACKC bus. The VACKC bus is a grant-funded 12-passenger bus, but due to the infrequency of use as the van is more accessible, along with the CBOC also having a bus, the VACKC is currently in the process of returning as we believe the van serves our veterans' best in both purpose and in terms of how many veterans contact us for transportation.



## Veterans Served by Residence



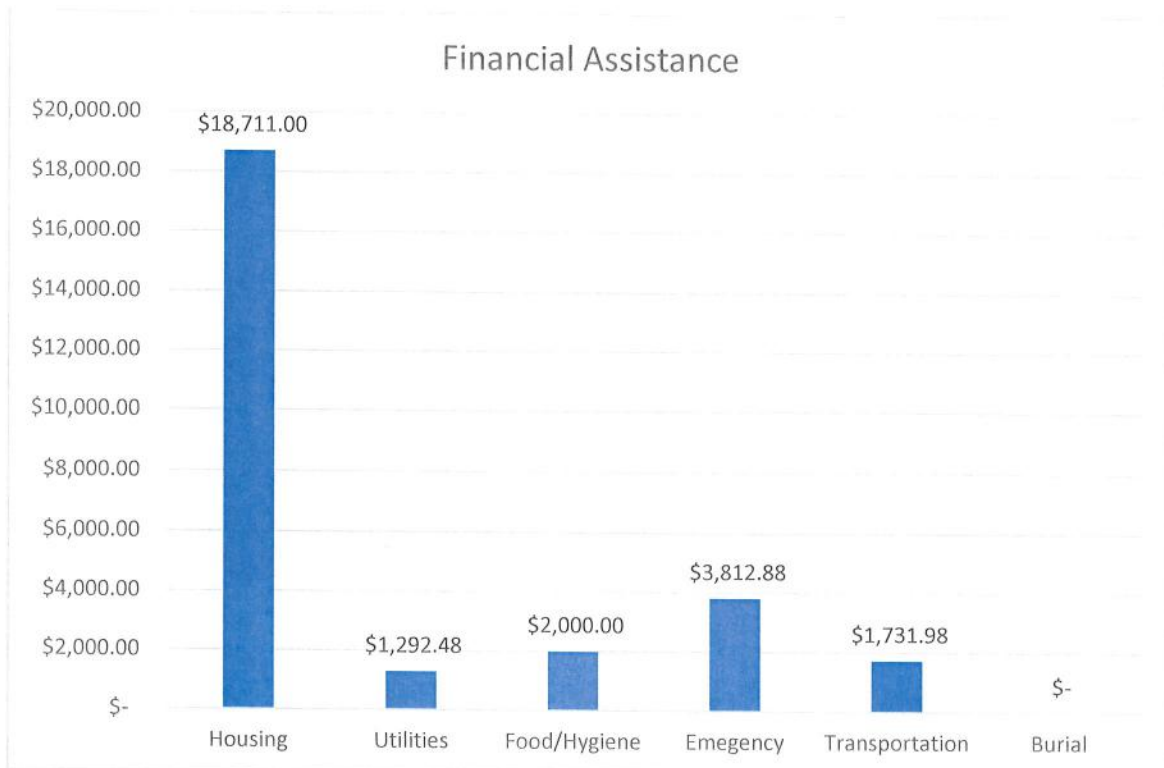
Veteran Registered Residence	Number of Veterans Served
Bourbonnais	714
Bradley	343
Homeless	23
Kankakee	926
Manteno	198
Momence	155
Out of State	72
Outside Kankakee County	497
Pembroke	81
Small Town Kankakee County	186
St. Anne	171
Unknown	86

# VETERANS FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Our Financial and Emergency Assistance programs continue to play a vital role in helping low-income veterans and surviving spouses maintain the stability and integrity of their households. Through our financial assistance program, we make direct payments to vendors for essential needs such as rent or mortgage, utilities, and personal hygiene items. Our emergency assistance program serves those who may not qualify for financial assistance, as well as those who do qualify but are experiencing an unexpected financial crisis.

In 2025, we provided financial or emergency assistance to 188 veterans and widows. In addition to the financial assistance we can provide in our office, we also have partnered with several community organizations (Salute, Inc., Operation Veterans Success, Our Patriots, Illinois Veterans of Desert Wars) that specialize in financial assistance for the veteran community so that we can help address financial challenges for our veterans while building relationships with other incredible veteran support organizations.

Our financial assistance numbers have decreased in recent years, and we attribute this positive trend to the success of our Veteran Service Officers in securing VA benefits for eligible veterans, thereby improving their long-term financial stability. By also partnering with other organizations that offer financial literacy programs, we can assist in educating veterans to ensure that they are becoming more fiscally responsible so their dollars can go further. In an effort to increase our financial assistance numbers, in February of 2025 the VACKC expanded eligibility from 150% to 200% of the federal poverty level, along with increased amounts. VACKC has also recently released a press release on the updated Financial Assistance Program to encourage more veterans to apply.



Housing	Utilities	Food / Hygiene	Emergency	Transportation	Burial	2025 Total
\$ 18711	\$1292.48	\$2000	\$3812.88	\$1731.98	\$0	\$27548.34

1. **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 small decrease in office visits for financial assistance, but an overall increase in the dollars of assistance provided to veterans/families of Kankakee County.

2. **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.

3. **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.

4. **Emergency Assistance**

Emergency Assistance fills in the gaps when a veteran finds themselves homeless or about to be homeless, and we are unable to find assistance through other veteran service organizations. 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. In 2025 we made a concentrated effort to work with our community partners to supply a lot of our needs in this category, allowing our partners to become more involved in our local veteran community while ensuring our veterans' needs are still being met.

5. **Transportation**

Transportation assistance is provided in the form of Metro Bus tokens and passes. In 2026 we will be obtaining gas cards to be able to help with transportation to and from work, and/or medical appointments as this is a need that has been communicated to us.

6. **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.



# Partnerships

Operating as a Veteran Service Organization in a rural area an hour away from a large metropolitan hub, building community partnerships to fill in the gaps of care for the veterans we serve is an ongoing, ever-changing, extremely important endeavor. With the multitude of ways in which we serve the veteran community, it is imperative that we leverage our relationships to bring in community partners to bring their strengths to the table, and in 2025 these individuals and organizations came out in a very big way. In 2025 there were several issues brought to our attention from our veteran community to include:

## **1. Food Scarcity**

Food scarcity and veterans in need of quality, nutrient-dense food was an issue that we have relied on our generous community for in the past in terms of our former food pantry and local food pantries. However, in 2025 we were able to partner with Let's Ketchup out of Bourbonnais IL and Farm2Veteran out of Manhattan IL to provide support for both our office and the Liberty Lodge. Let's Ketchup has provided bags of quality meat and produce for us to distribute to veterans in need, and Farm2Veteran supplied both the VACKC office and the Liberty Lodge with deep freezers, approximately 450 pounds of farm fresh beef, fresh fruit, and produce. In addition to these great resources, we also were thankful this Thanksgiving to partner with local businesses to be able to provide full Thanksgiving meals to over 20 Veteran families in need.

## **2. Alternative Ways to Manage Pain**

VACKC frequently works with veterans experiencing chronic pain, many of whom express limited satisfaction with traditional pharmaceutical interventions. To expand access to non-pharmaceutical pain management options, the Commission partnered with H-Wave to provide monthly in-office demonstrations of its electrotherapy device. H-Wave is a rehabilitative modality designed to support pain relief and recovery by addressing underlying physiological factors and promoting cumulative, long-term benefits. Following these demonstrations, veterans may consult with their primary care providers at the adjacent VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic to determine whether an H-Wave unit is appropriate for home use. When prescribed, the device is provided at no cost to the veteran, allowing individuals to make informed decisions about its effectiveness based on firsthand experience.

## **3. Hines VA Hospital Behavioral Health Support**

In 2025 our office dealt with veterans dealing with substance use issues, mental health conditions, and other significant impairments requiring additional support, to include having at times, a suicidal veteran entering our office. Thankfully due to our relationship with the CBOC next door, we are able to work with their social workers as needed to ensure our veterans get the care that they need. Although when more significant assistance from a treatment perspective is needed, we found that veterans in rural communities faced many challenges when attempting to get into treatment programs at Hines VA Hospital. The VACKC reached out to the Director of Hines VA about our concerns, and in return was given a dedicated team through Hines consisting of the Chief of their Mental Health Service Line, a Chief Nurse, Outpatient Nurse Manager, and Inpatient Nurse Manager. This has greatly improved communication for Veterans in need in our community while building our relationship with our closest VA Hospital, that results in improved care for our veterans.



#### **4. Veteran Homelessness**

The VACKC has partnered with the Kankakee County Housing Authority to provide supportive services to the Liberty Lodge, a 14- “efficiency” unit permanent supportive housing project for veterans. Through this partnership, VACKC has also partnered with:

- Uplifted Care to provide a Chaplain for Pastoral Care
- Hines VA to provide a Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Rural Outreach Case Manager
- Thresholds to provide Mental Health Counselors and Social Workers
- Midwest Shelters for Homeless Veterans to provide hygiene and toiletry items on a regular basis
- Let’s Ketchup to provide bags of quality food from the Northern Illinois Food Bank
- Farm2Veteran to provide a nutrient-dense food pantry inside the lodge where we currently have eggs and ground beef, and look to expand in 2026 with produce
- Multiple local businesses and organizations to provide warm meals, furniture, artwork, and more

In the process of this, VACKC has caught the attention of both the Illinois Department of Veteran Affairs (IDVA) and the Illinois Office to Prevent and End Homelessness (OPEH). From that attention, the VACKC was given the opportunity to welcome Chief Christine Haley of OPEH and Director Terry Prince of IDVA to the Liberty Lodge to take a tour and learn more about how Kankakee County is moving past other counties in terms of how we are caring for our homeless veteran community.

## 2026 Outlook and Goals

The Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County (VACKC) continues to serve as a critical access point for veterans and their families seeking stability, benefits, and long-term support. During Fiscal Year 2025, the Commission strengthened its role as both a safety net and an advocacy-driven service organization, delivering measurable outcomes that improved the financial security, housing stability, and overall well-being of veterans across Kankakee County.

Through coordinated financial assistance, emergency interventions, claims advocacy, housing partnerships, and judicial collaboration, the Commission reduced crisis dependency while expanding long-term stability.

The Commission's work reflects a maturing, forward-looking model—one that emphasizes professional accreditation, community partnerships, and data-informed service delivery. As veteran needs evolve, the VACKC remains committed to scaling capacity, modernizing facilities, and expanding partnerships to ensure no veteran in Kankakee County is left without support.

One of VACKC's primary goals for the coming year is to renovate the office entrance and waiting area to improve accessibility and better support veterans with diverse needs. The current reception counter does not meet ADA compliance standards, and the existing waiting area is limited in size, which can be challenging for veterans experiencing mental health or sensory-related conditions. The planned renovation will create a more welcoming, accessible, and trauma-informed environment while also allowing for expanded space to enhance the Commission's food pantry and clothing closet. Our other primary focus for 2026 is to add one VSO and one part-time administrative assistant to our staff to continue to meet our veterans' needs.

As the Superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Kankakee County, I am proud of the work our 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, hard-working VSOs dedicating themselves to honoring our Nations' Veterans.

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.

Respectfully,

Eric W. Peterson  
Superintendent

# References

1. Veteran Population

[https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/kankakeecountyillinois/PST045222?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/kankakeecountyillinois/PST045222?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

2. American Indian Veterans Access to Mental Telehealthcare

[https://www.usmedicine.com/clinical-topics/mental-health/american-indian-alaska-native-veterans-had-less-access-to-mental-telehealthcare/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.usmedicine.com/clinical-topics/mental-health/american-indian-alaska-native-veterans-had-less-access-to-mental-telehealthcare/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

3. Rural Veteran Statistics by County

[https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/Rural.asp?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/Rural.asp?utm_source=chatgpt.com)