

LaSalle County Veterans Assistance Commission

Superintendent
Christa Hammers



Assistant Superintendent
Lissa Olson

Office of the Governor
State Capital Room 207
Springfield, IL 62706

December 22, 2025

Governor Pritzker,

As required by 330 ILCS 45 (The Military Veterans Assistance Act) I am submitting the Veterans Assistance of LaSalle County Annual Report for the Fiscal Year ending November 30, 2025.

Our office staff is comprised of myself, an Administrative Assistant – Kelli Rietgraf and now, 2 other VSO's. One of which is the outreach VSO – Emily Hackler – travelling to Streator and Marseilles once a week to offer easier access to assistance for our clients. The other, our Assistant Superintendent – Lissa Olson, is part of 10 different local organizations – attending meetings and speaking on behalf of the VAC.

In 2025 our office focused on outreach events and marketing our services to help our Veterans understand what we offer. In total, our office attended 11 local events and were able to host our fifth annual Veterans Expo. The Expo had about 50 vendors from all areas that assist Veterans/families and we had about 200 attendees. The LCVAC continues to partner with Hines Outreach and Vocational Rehabilitation to provide an additional location for their staff. We also have added a counselor from the Aurora Vet Center to our office and his presence has made a difference in many Veterans' lives. We are looking into having him in office every week instead of once a month. We continue to try and reach more Veterans by being active on both the local radio stations and social media.

We have one VSO – Emily Hackler, that has expanded her knowledge and has taken a social media class that allows her to better understand how to reach and engage our clients. With this she has taken over our social media accounts and started a quarterly newsletter. We are very excited to see what she can continue to achieve with her new skills. Our other VSO and Assistant Superintendent – Lissa Olson, has started her training to become a Certified Veterans Advocate. It is a long process that takes no less than a year and a half to complete but allows the student to become more knowledgeable in VA Appeals processes and understanding VA benefit decision letters.

Unfortunately, the VA wait time for claims is still about 16 months from submission to decision. With that said, I am extremely proud of our team and the work we put into helping our clients. Our numbers reflect new claim benefits, so even if a Veteran/Family member were receiving benefits prior, it is not counted for the current

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fiscal year. I am honored to report that our monetary benefits for Veterans and their families totaled \$10,774,662.24. Again, this number is not cumulative and is just for fiscal year 2025. Since taking over the office in 2022, we have brought in \$33,947,079.26 to our Veterans/Families. We are very proud of the work we have done and what our efforts allow our clients to be able to do. In FY 2026, we will begin again and make every effort to be as successful as this last year.

We continue to further educate our staff so we can stay up to date with the new legislature and best practices for our clients. Our Assistant Superintendent is a co-chair on our State Association Board for Education and has made it a priority to bring in entities/people to our training courses that better our overall knowledge and keep us informed. Our office also had one VSO take a course on Advanced Appeals training and another that again started the Certified Veterans Advocate course.

We continue to attend annual training courses and meetings-both state and nation-wide. Our office has attended the Illinois Association of County Officials (IACO), Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA), Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions (IACVAC), and National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO) conferences this past year and will continue to do so in the future. Our Assistant Superintendent was able to attend meetings in both Springfield and Washington D.C. this year to speak with legislators about matters affecting our Veterans. We are grateful to have these opportunities and know that our voice matters.

Even though I am extremely proud of my team and the number of monetary benefits we were able to bring in, and the education we have received, I am even more proud of the Events and Programs that we have offered to our Veterans and Families. In 2025, we have again participated in Operation Green light and handed out green light bulbs for Veterans day, continued the Veterans Giving Tree Event – where we connected with the LaSalle Veterans Home and the community to be sure all 90 Veterans in the home had a gift this Christmas- which amounted to over 450 presents wrapped and delivered and decorated all of the windows at the LaSalle Veterans Home for the holiday season.

Our office not only offers claims assistance, programs, and events- we also assist Veterans in their time of need. Whether it is a one-time event or monthly occurrence. In 2025, we paid claims for direct financial assistance totaling \$8,725 via vouchers to vendors- for either rent or utilities payments. We also partner with Midwest Shelter for Homeless Veterans and a local food pantry to bring these Veterans home items such as toiletries as well as nourishment. It is this office's aim to not only see these Veterans and make sure they are receiving every benefit they are eligible for, but also connect them with other community resources that may be able to further

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assist them. The goal for our assistance program is to be able to give the Veteran benefits that sustain them enough that they no longer require our help. In FY25 we were able to get 3 Veterans that were homeless/nearly homeless off our general assistance program by providing help in filing claims for both Compensation and Pension. With our help these Veterans are no longer worried about a roof over their heads or food on the table and we are truly honored to be a small part of that. Unfortunately, even though we successfully were able to get a few Veterans more stability, we still get new referrals regularly. This is a need that we are looking into and how to better care for those under the poverty level.

Our office has also had many referrals for mental health care/emergency crisis calls. We have partnered with Kankakee, Will, Grundy and Kendall counties to form an alliance for better response times through the use of a already started non-profit called Project Headspace and Timing (PHAT). We are currently requesting Veteran volunteers that will be background screened and be responders for Veterans in crisis. We are also working with our local mental health providers to make sure any Veteran in crisis gets a referral to our office. This is a slow-moving situation because we want to make sure everything is done correctly, but the pay off is making sure our Veterans in their most vulnerable spot will be taken care of to the best of our ability. We look forward to what this multi-county alliance will be able to accomplish.

The goal of the LaSalle County Veterans Assistance Commission has always been, and will continue to be, that of assisting our Veterans and their Families in every way possible. Our office has provided great benefits for the county and our Veterans this past year and we will continue to do so for years to come. It is our honor to serve our nations hero's and their families, and we will continue to expand our services in the hopes of filling needs of even a greater number of Veterans.

Respectfully submitted,

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