

VETERANS ASSISTANCE COMMISSION
OF
LAKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Andrew C. Tangen, Superintendent



Annual Report

Fiscal Year 2018

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December 28, 2018

The Honorable Bruce Rauner
Governor of Illinois
State Capital Room 207
Springfield, IL 62706-0001

Dear Governor Rauner,

It is with great pleasure that I present you with the annual report of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Lake County, Illinois, pursuant to Chapter 330, Part 45, Section 8 of the Illinois Compiled Statutes.

As the foremost veteran advocacy agency in Illinois' 2nd most veteran populous county, we provide services in the following categories:

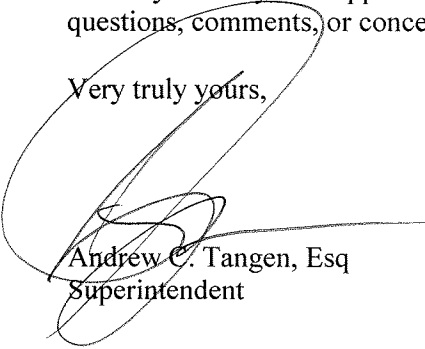
- 1.) Advocacy
- 2.) Benefit Application Filing and Claims Management
- 3.) Financial Assistance for Indigent Veterans

In Fiscal Year 2018, the Commission was instrumental in securing an estimated \$5,762,920.60 - \$7,356,913.92 in new benefits for Lake County veterans, their dependents, and their survivors from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). With this additional benefit increase, it is estimated that FY2018 total benefits paid will be \$112,980,914, which is an increase over FY2017 total benefits of \$105,624,000.

This represents a return to the community of \$215.20 for every dollar of property tax revenue received by the Commission. That amount does not consider money that we helped our veterans save by assisting them in accessing VA health care, home loan, or education benefits. Consequently, the Commission continues to be a significant and judicious governmental entity at the county level.

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

Very truly yours,


Andrew C. Tangen, Esq
Superintendent

Glossary of Terms

Compensation: See “Disability Compensation”

Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC): A tax-free monetary benefit paid to eligible survivors of military service members who died in the line of duty or eligible survivors of veterans whose death resulted from a service-related injury or disease.

Disability Compensation: A tax-free monetary benefit paid to veterans with disabilities that are the result of a disease or injury incurred in or aggravated during active military service.

Functional Zero: A goal that is reached when the number of veterans experiencing homelessness within a community is less than the average number of veterans being connected with permanent housing each month.

Intent-to-File: An application for veterans and survivors who intend to file a claim for VA compensation, pension, or survivors’ benefits which preserves the effective date of future benefits while the claimant is gathering supporting documentation for their formal claim.

Non-Service Connected Pension: See “Pension”

Pension: A tax-free needs-based monetary benefit paid to wartime veterans, who meet certain age or non-service connected disability requirements.

Pension Management Center: A department at certain VA Regional Offices that is responsible for processing and adjudicating claims for pension, survivor’s pension, dependency and indemnity compensation, and burial benefits.

Regional Office: One of 56 VA offices located nationwide responsible for processing and adjudicating VA benefits which primarily includes disability compensation.

Superintendent: The executive powers of the Veterans Assistance Commission vest within this individual and that individual acts as the Chief Veterans Advocate for the Veterans of the County.

Survivor’s Pension: A tax-free needs-based monetary benefit payable to a low-income, un-remarried surviving spouse and/or unmarried child(ren) of a deceased wartime veteran.

VA Health Care: A comprehensive medical benefits package available to qualifying veterans which includes primary and specialty care at VA hospitals and clinics.

Veterans Service Officer: An individual who is accredited by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs who assists veterans and their dependents in the filing of claims, and advocacy for, benefits with the VA.

Work/Study Student: A veteran student who is using VA education benefits and is paid by the VA to do VA related work at no cost to the County.

Veterans Assistance Commission Delegates and Alternates 2018

President Nicholas G. Konz – Mundelein American Legion Post 867
Vice-President Thomas Marciciak – Lake Zurich American Legion Post 964
Chaplain Marie Honeywell – Lake Zurich Veterans of Foreign War Post 110
Sergeant at Arms Donald Nickerson – Samuel Schiera American Legion Post 1943
Executive Committee John Patterson – Polish League of American Veterans Post 25
Executive Committee John DeReu – Military Officers Association of America
Executive Committee Harry Swanson – Libertyville American Legion Post 329
Executive Committee Al Zelent - Deerfield American Legion Post 738*
Executive Committee Terry Waddell – Gurnee American Legion Post 771
Delegate George Swenson – Antioch American Legion Post 748
Delegate John Reid – Deerfield American Legion Post 738
Delegate Fergal Gallagher – Grayslake American Legion Post 659
Alternate Robert Wegge – Grayslake American Legion Post 659
Delegate William Frangquist – Gurnee American Legion Post 771
Alternate Terry Waddell – Gurnee American Legion Post 771
Delegate Robert Gabriel – Lakes Region American Legion Post 703
Alternate Joseph Dehn – Lakes Region American Legion Post 703
Delegate Richard Johnson – Lake Zurich American Legion Post 964
Alternate Thomas Marciciak – Lake Zurich American Legion Post 964
Delegate Harry Swanson – Libertyville American Legion Post 329
Alternate Norm Arnswald – Libertyville American Legion Post 329
Delegate Larry Crone – McKinlock American Legion Post 264
Delegate James A. Nelson – Mundelein American Legion Post 867
Alternate Larry Klauser – Mundelein American Legion Post 867
Delegate Donald Nickerson – Samuel Schiera American Legion Post 1943
Alternate John Patterson – Samuel Schiera American Legion Post 1943
Delegate William Geary – Wauconda American Legion Post 911
Alternate Kenneth Stetina – Wauconda American Legion Post 911
Alternate Donald Castella – Wauconda American Legion Post 911
Delegate James Duncan – Zion Benton American Legion Post 865
Delegate William Oerly – Antioch Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 4551
Delegate Barry Desfor – Island Lake Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2486
Alternate John Riendi – Island Lake Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2486
Delegate Marie Honeywell – Lake Zurich Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1102
Delegate Bernard J Voit – Libertyville Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 8741
Alternate Kenneth Parrish – Libertyville Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 8741
Delegate David Stewart – Winthrop Harbor Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7448
Delegate Allan Ayers – Marine Corps League 1395
Delegate Oliver Davidson – Marine Corps League 801
Delegate John DeReu – Military Officers Association of America
Alternate Ginny DeReu – Military Officers Association of America
Delegate Christine Pawley – Polish League of American Veterans Post 25
Delegate Art Dutkovic – Reserve Officers Association of America Chapter 48
Delegate Michael Zimmerman – Jewish War Veterans North Shore Post 29
Alternate Martin Rockwell - Jewish War Veterans North Shore Post 29
Delegate John Patterson – Disabled American Veterans Chapter 16

Delegate Thomas Hilliard – Ron Hill Memorial Veterans of Foreign War Post 2245

Delegate Stephen Baker – Lake Villa Veterans of Foreign War Post 4308

Alternate Paul Baumunk – Lake Villa Veterans of Foreign War Post 4308

Alternate Thomas Skau – Lake Villa Veterans of Foreign War Post 4308

**Al Zelent, a long time Veterans Advocate, WWII Veteran, and Kamikaze Attack Survivor stepped down from his position at the age of 96 to spend additional time with family. He will be sorely missed and we wish him the best in whatever he continues to work on.*

The Mission of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Lake County

To promote the welfare of honorably discharged Veterans of military service and their families through maximizing all possible benefits through effective and dynamic advocacy and by serving as a central service office for all veterans residing in the County of Lake.

This mission is accomplished through three key areas:

- 1) Veterans Assistance
- 2) Advocacy
- 3) Partnerships

The Staff of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Lake County is currently comprised of Superintendent Andrew C. Tangen; Assistant Superintendent Sherry J. Kruse; Veteran Service Officers Michael Hiley and Deanna Inglis; Volunteers Allan Ayers, Douglas Wallace, and Michael Kozar; and, current VA Work Study Angel Andrade.

New Hire John Murray was hired after the VAC eliminated two legacy programs, transportation and emergency assistance boxes, purchased by the VAC and supplied by the COOL Food Pantry. He will become a fully accredited VSO after completing the accreditation course for NACVSO, scheduled for the first week of June 2019 in Cleveland, OH. John is a retired Master Chief Hospital Corpsman, having deployed twice to Iraq and twice to Afghanistan with United States Marine Corps, two of which were with Third Reconnaissance Battalion, Third Marine Division and two with First Marines Special Operations Battalion, Marine Corps Special Operations Command. He is the recipient of the Purple Heart Medal for injuries sustained in combat with enemy forces in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

Veterans Assistance

The VAC provides emergency financial assistance, available to all honorably discharged veterans of the County, including, but not limited to: rental and mortgage assistance; utility payments; aid to the medically indigent; assistance and emergency shelter to homeless veterans, those veterans in danger of becoming homeless, and those veterans displaced by natural disasters; and, burial assistance of indigent veterans.

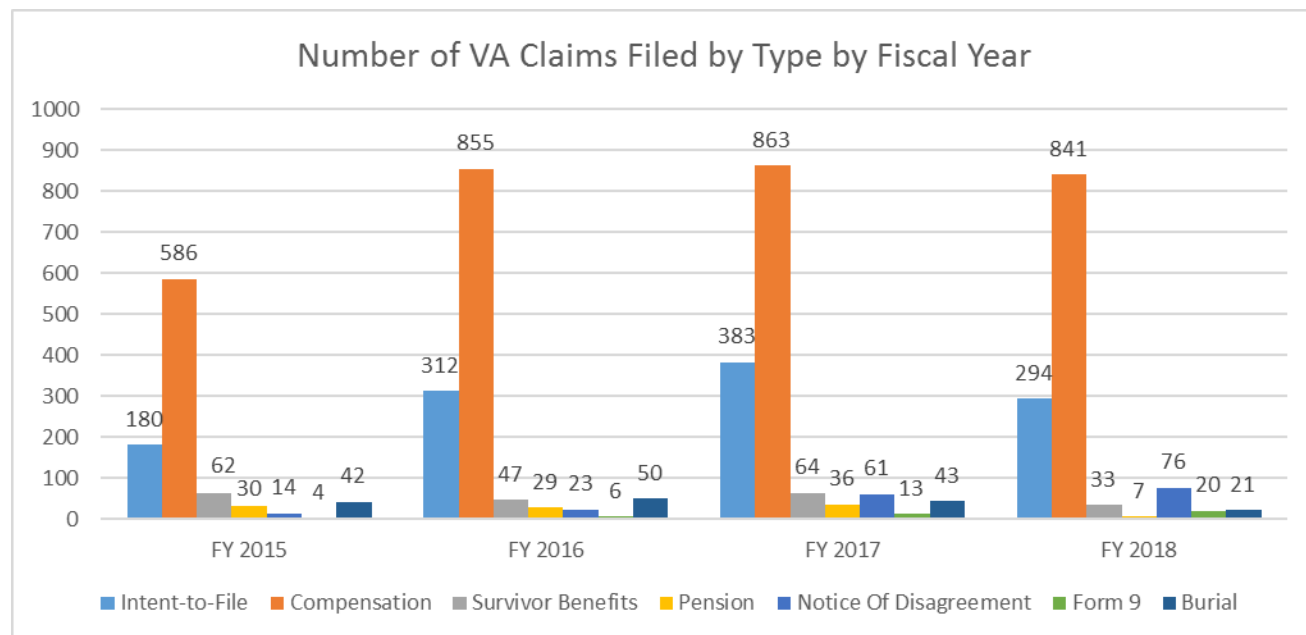
This year, the VAC provided: two (2) indigent veterans burial assistance; 203 nights of emergency housing, which included both providing homeless veterans with housing as they waited to be placed into the VA homeless program, and several veterans and their families who were displaced from a massive fire at an apartment complex in Waukegan, Il in April; and, provided 63 veterans emergency financial assistance.

The Veterans Ambassador Program, started last year in partnership and collaboration with the Lake County Sheriff's Office, Providing Advocacy, Dignity, and Shelter (PADS) Lake County, The Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center (FHCC), the Midwest Veterans Closet, and Medal of Honor Recipient Allen J. Lynch, added additional partners this spring, to include the Lake County States Attorney's Office and the Lake County Veteran's and Family Services Foundation. This group has worked tirelessly throughout the last year to ensure that no veteran is left behind. Through this program and each of the partner programs, Lake County, Illinois is the first County in Illinois to be operating at **FUNCTIONAL ZERO**. The work that has been put into reaching this goal by these partners is a template for others to follow. The Captain James A. Lovell FHCC Homeless Program is being recognized as a national leader for other Veterans Affairs Hospitals and communities to emulate. The only other partner of note in this fight for becoming Functional Zero was Lake County Community Development. The former Lake County Administrator, the former Lake County Board Chairman, and the former Lake County Board provided no partnership and no assistance to this goal.

Further, these successes have not been without setbacks. After providing the Lake County Government with the data and reasoning to support increasing the Staff of the VAC and being informed that the money would have to come from inside the VAC's existing budget, the VAC made the determination to eliminate the partnership with Disabled American Veterans transportation that has existed for twenty (20) years and the partnership with COOL Food Pantry to provide emergency assistance boxes to needy Veterans that had existed for six (6) years. This was done after a careful review of each program to determine the ones that could be potentially scaled back, renegotiated, or had contracts expiring, and after the former County Administrator informed the VAC that the only way he would recommend to the County Board to grant a new staff position is if the VAC eliminated these programs and never asked for them back.

Advocacy

Advocating on behalf of Veterans involves assisting in the filing of claims for compensation, pension, school, and insurance, to local, state and federal agencies that includes the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Social Security Administration, adjudicating appeals for Veterans denied by representing those Veterans at the Board of Veterans Appeals, the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, and the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit.



2018 produced fewer number of initial claims than the two proceeding years due to several factors. First, FY 2018 was a transformative year for the VAC. After nearly twenty-five (25) years, the VAC moved from its old office space located in downtown Waukegan to a new, state of the art, office located in Gurnee, IL. This office provides a clean, safe, and welcoming environment to veterans, their dependents, and surviving spouses seeking assistance. Further, this office is centrally located in Lake County, close to major thoroughfares and public transportation. This move was done completely by the VAC staff, with the only assistance coming from the Lake County Government being the IT Department. In addition, this move saves taxpayers approximately \$50,000.00 a year, due to the reduction in rent from moving from Waukegan to Gurnee.

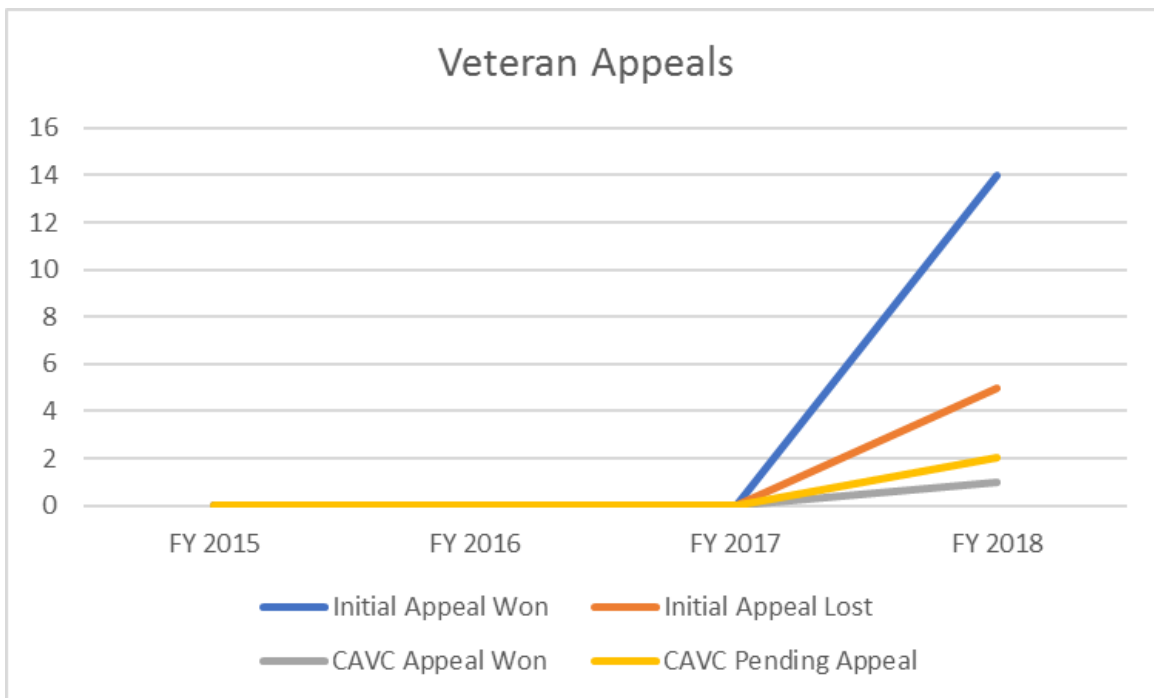
Second, initial claim numbers were reduced due to the Superintendent tasking the Assistant Superintendent with a special project to update the records of each client of the VAC. This project took approximately three (3) months to complete. During the Superintendent's review, thousands of records were discovered to contain incorrect addresses and contact information, incorrect benefits information, and inaccurate dependent information, which needed to be corrected. This took the bulk of the Assistant Superintendent's Second and Third Quarter of FY 2018 to rectify. To ensure this does not occur again, the Superintendent implemented additional trackers and standard operating procedures to ensure accurate records keeping is maintained.

Finally, the VAC attempted on multiple occasions to negotiate with the County Government in an attempt to have a mutually beneficial agreement as to how best to serve the veterans of Lake County. At every opportunity, the VAC informed the County Government that the best way forward was to increase the staff

by a minimum of three (3) additional VSO's. This would make Lake County comparable to other VAC's located within the Collar Counties, in staff organization when applied to veteran population of a given county. The VAC was forced to reschedule, delay, and postpone meetings with veterans desiring to learn of benefits available and file claims in order to attempt to answer every request for information from the County Government. Many of these requests came late in the day, demanding response immediately, and some requests came after the deadlines for submissions had past.

Throughout the preceding year, and through information and belief, the VAC staff would provide information to the County Government, which the County Government would not take into consideration on multiple interactions between the former Lake County Administrator and County Board.

This pattern continued through the FY 2019 budget cycle, with the VAC being denied the opportunity or chance to negotiate any of the new requests for FY 2019. The former County Administrator made a determination as to how the VAC should be structured, based on his mistaken belief that there is no need for the VAC's to exist. The former County Board approved the former County Administrator's recommendations and did not grant any increase to staff or budget for the VAC.



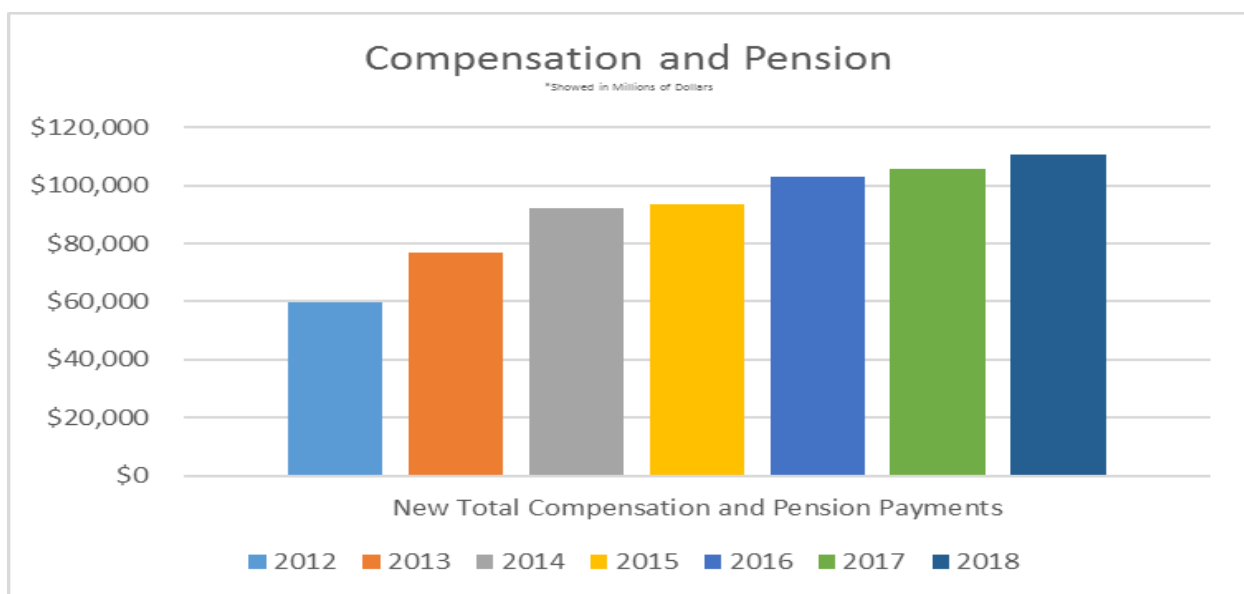
Despite this, the VAC continues to advocate in front of the Board of Veterans Appeals, the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, and the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. Further, the VAC represented several veterans in the Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP), the pilot program for the Appeals Modernization Act. FY 2018 saw fourteen (14) cases receiving favorable decisions at either the Board of Veterans Appeals or through RAMP and five (5) cases receiving unfavorable decisions. The 5 cases which received unfavorable decisions are continuing through further review at the Board of Veterans Appeals.

Further, the VAC represented three (3) veterans at the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. One (1) of those cases received a favorable decision and the other two are still awaiting disposition.

Appeals for Lake County claims are increasing because the staff is taking a more active role in assisting veterans and dependents with wrongly denied claims.

Board of Veterans' Appeals										
Board Dispositions by VA Program FY 2017										
APPEAL PROGRAM	ALLOWED		REMANDED		DENIED		OTHER		TOTAL	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Burial Benefits	2	5.26%	10	26.32%	25	65.79%	1	2.63%	38	0.07%
Compensation	15,359	30.22%	22,257	43.80%	10,728	21.11%	2,472	4.86%	50,816	96.60%
Education	46	24.08%	49	25.65%	85	44.50%	11	5.76%	191	0.36%
Insurance	1	16.67%	2	33.33%	3	50.00%	0	0.00%	6	0.01%
Loan Guaranty	1	5.26%	9	47.37%	9	47.37%	0	0.00%	19	0.04%
Medical	70	27.78%	98	38.89%	62	24.60%	22	8.73%	252	0.48%
Pension	94	15.75%	164	27.47%	278	46.57%	61	10.22%	597	1.13%
VR&E	8	18.18%	16	36.36%	16	36.36%	4	9.09%	44	0.08%
Other Programs	9	17.31%	12	23.08%	25	48.08%	6	11.54%	52	0.10%
BVA Original Jurisdiction	6	7.79%	0	0.00%	45	58.44%	26	33.77%	77	0.15%
NCA Burial Benefits	0	0.00%	2	13.33%	10	66.67%	3	20.00%	15	0.03%
Fiduciary	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	100.00%	1	0.00%
Multiple Program Areas	171	30.92%	282	50.99%	85	15.37%	15	2.71%	553	1.05%
GRAND TOTAL	15,767	29.94%	22,901	43.49%	11,371	21.59%	2,622	4.98%	52,661	100%

As the table above, from the Board of Veteran's Appeals, demonstrates, 73.43% of all appeals are either reversed or remanded. When an appeal is reversed, this indicates that the Veteran Law Judge (VLJ) found within the record on appeal reasons that indicate that the claim should have been initially granted by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). When an appeal is remanded, this indicates that the VLJ has found within the record on appeal reasons that indicate there should have been further processing and development by the VBA prior to rendering the denial decision.

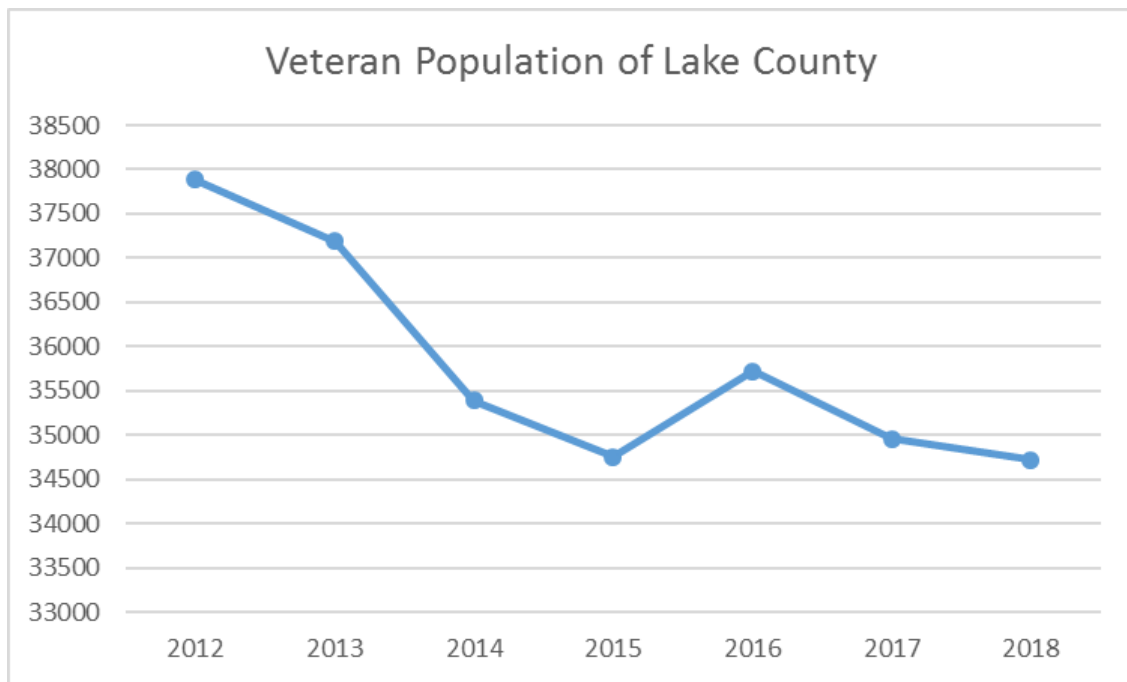


As indicated in the Introductory Letter, the Commission was instrumental in securing an estimated \$5,762,920.60 - \$7,356,913.92 in new benefits for Lake County veterans, their dependents, and their survivors from VA. With this additional benefit increase, it is estimated that FY2018 total benefits paid will be \$112,980,914, which is an increase over FY2017 total benefits of \$105,624,000.

This represents a return to the community of \$215.20 for every dollar of property tax revenue received by the Commission. That amount does not consider money that we helped our veterans save by assisting them in accessing VA health care, home loan, or education benefits. Consequently, the Commission continues to be a significant and judicious governmental entity at the county level.

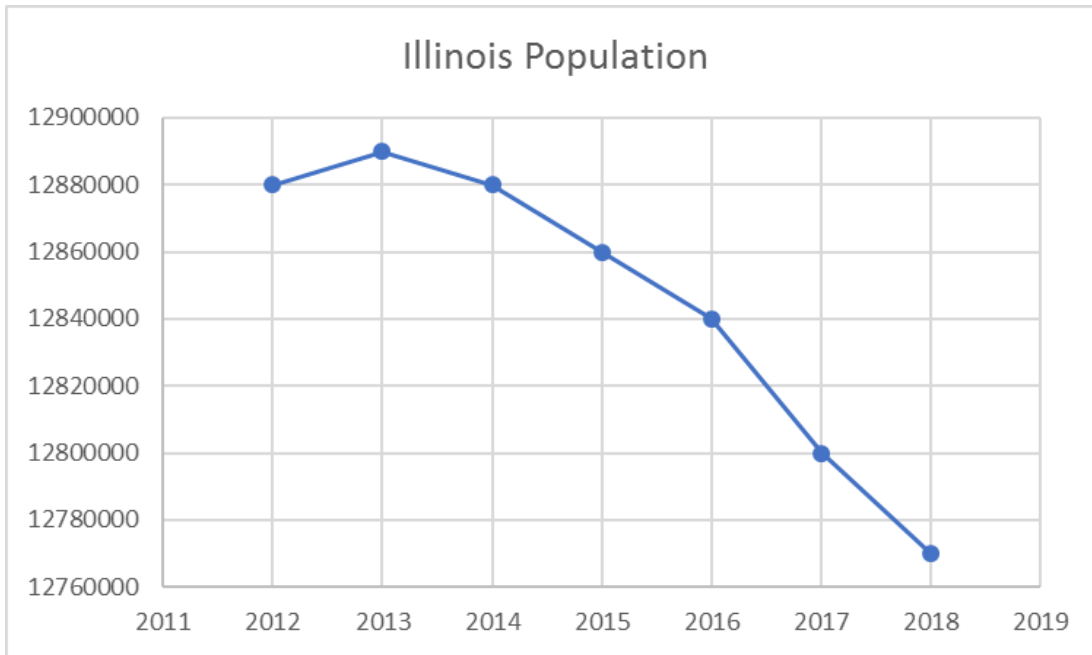
However, this barely scratches the surface as to what could potentially be available to the veterans of Lake County. The veterans of Lake County currently receiving compensation or pension represents 16.9% of Lake County veterans and is 9.1% below the National average. Illinois currently ranks 52nd in per capita compensation and pension, behind every State, Guam, and Puerto Rico. As these statistics demonstrate, Lake County has been grossly underservicing its veterans for years. We do not believe that the VACLC is the end-all solution to correcting this discrepancy; however, other Veteran Service Organizations are similarly short-staffed. What results is a lack of available services to our veterans. This causes many veterans to give up on filing for services that they very well may be eligible to.

If the veterans of Lake County were to be at the National Average of 26%, it is estimated that the veterans of Lake County would be in receipt of \$148,675,188 in compensation and pension annually.



The veteran population of Lake County continues to fluctuate but does indicate a downward trend. This is primarily due to death of veterans and veterans moving out of the County. However, Lake County still has the 2nd largest veterans population in the State of Illinois, behind only Chicago.

The veteran population does not completely mesh with the trendline for Illinois population over the same period, which has shown a continuous decline.



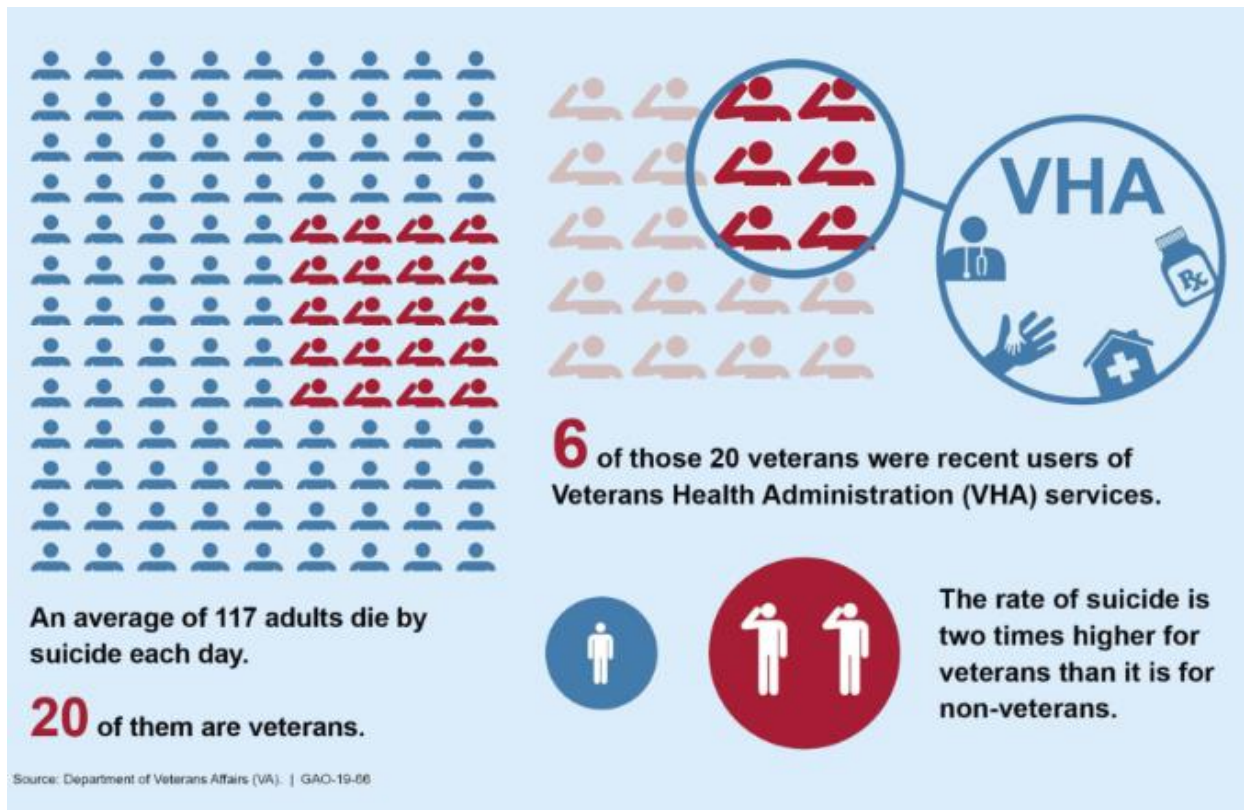
In an effort to combat this decrease in veteran’s population for Lake County, the VAC has attempted to recommend to the Lake County Government ways in which a partnership can be developed to recruit active duty veterans to remain in the County upon discharge or retirement and to recruit veterans who have exited the military and started companies to invest their businesses into Lake County.

Current statistics show that Post-9/11 Veterans are achieving higher education at rates far surpassing their civilian counterparts. These Veterans are succeeding in every endeavor they undertake, from starting unique businesses, politics, social issues, and professional fields.

In an era wherein Illinois is experiencing a massive exodus of population and wherein every single county of the 102 counties in the State, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, has lost more than 2% of its businesses from 2014-2017, Lake County should be focused on tapping this underutilized resource by providing policies and plans that will benefit these individuals to move to the County.

Unfortunately, the Lake County Government has made the determination that providing increased staff and an increased budget to the VAC is not a priority for the County. The VAC, veterans’ issues, and veterans generally are not included in the 2018 Lake County Strategic Plan.

This lack of inclusion on the Lake County Government’s Strategic Plan continues further to not include veterans or the VAC in the County’s continuing and ongoing discussions, plans, and policies for opioid addiction, suicide, and mental health issues. In each of these issues, veterans are disproportionately affected when compared to their civilian counterparts. Many veterans suffer from orthopedic, musculoskeletal injuries, muscle injuries, and other injuries, which were treated for many years by the VA with opioids. This has had the unintended effect of veterans suffering from opioid addiction.



This exclusion by the Lake County Government of veterans and the VAC in the continuing and ongoing discussions, plans, and policies for opioid addiction, suicide, and mental health issues continues into the funding realm by providing other entities within the County increased funds and staff to address these issues, while rejecting any attempt by the VAC to increase its staff and/or budget to address these issues.

With the rejection of the VAC’s requests for new staff, and with the Lake County Government continuing a pattern of not following 330 ILCS 45, Military Veterans Assistance Act, the VAC made the difficult determination to file a Writ of Mandamus against the Lake County Government and the Lake County Board in an effort to enforce the Statute and Laws of the State of Illinois.

The VAC was hoping that it would have not had to file the Writ of Mandamus, an extraordinary legal measure, against the Lake County Government; however, after decades of the Lake County Government acting in a manner antithetical to veterans and the unique issues facing veterans, it was the only measure left available for the VAC of Lake County.

Partnerships

The VAC has worked hand in hand with the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Lake County, on several events throughout the year, and the VAC looks forward to further collaboration for next year.

The VAC has continued its partnerships with both US Senate and Congressional offices and State Legislators in Lake County to ensure the best possible legislation is moved forward for Illinois Veterans. The VAC looks forward to continuing this tradition of partnerships with those newly elected.

The VAC has continued a strong partnership with Prairie State Legal Services.

As mentioned above, the VAC has partnered with Lake County Community Development to develop and implement a tracking system and network in order to track reports, interactions, and probable locations of homeless and near homeless Veterans throughout the County, regardless of discharge.

The VAC continued to partner with the Lake County Sheriff's Office, PADS Lake County, The Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center (FHCC), the Midwest Veterans Closet, Medal of Honor Recipient Allen J. Lynch, the Lake County States Attorney's Office, and Lake County Veterans and Family Services through the "Veteran Ambassador Program" and will continue to work with these organizations to maintain Functional Zero and ensure no veteran is left behind.

The VAC continued its partnership with the Allen J. Lynch Medal of Honor Veteran's Assistance Program and Operation Support Our Troops in order to further provide assistance to those Veterans in critical need.

As a member of the Illinois Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (Department of Defense sponsored organization) our office assists Lake County Reservists and Guardsmen with re-employment problems and recognition of private companies and employers who go above and beyond in supporting Lake County Reservists and Guardsmen who have been activated.

Partnership with the Illinois Department of Employment Security has increased to not only provide constant assistance to Lake County Veterans with employment referrals, but also with holding joint VAC/IDES meetings with employers to discuss and train employers on Veteran issues and the value Veterans can bring to these companies. Both the VAC and IDES have brought the Lake County Jobs Center into the coordination efforts to ensure continuity for Veterans seeking employment.

Lake County Recorder of Deeds coordinates the recording of military discharges and has provided excellent service in allowing our office to review and prepare copies for veterans when necessary.

The VAC continued its partnership with the Midwest Veterans Closet, continuing the much-needed service of providing clothing to veterans and their families.

Outlook For 2019

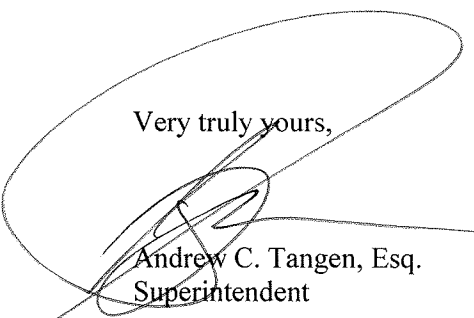
Fiscal Year 2018 was a year filled with many successes and a continued transformative process for the VAC. Through the hard work of the staff, delegates and alternates, and our community partners, Lake County was able to become Functional Zero. The VAC worked tirelessly to assist the veterans of Lake County by advocating on their behalf in front of multiple administrative agencies and governing bodies.

Though there were setbacks in the relationship to the County Government which offset the successes achieved by the VAC and partner organizations in FY 2018, causing a Writ of Mandamus to be filed against the Lake County Government, the VAC will continue to advocate and represent veterans through every stage their post military career and life leads them, continue to fight for the spouses and orphans of these brave men and women, to fulfill the solemn promise that Abraham Lincoln uttered and that adorns the Department of Veterans Affairs Headquarters in Washington, D.C., "to care for [them] who shall have borne the battle, and for [their] widow, and [their] orphan."

As stated last year, this will only be accomplished by increasing the staffing of the VAC, by adding additional employees in order to continue to provide prompt, effective, and accurate advocacy for the veterans of Lake County who gave their all to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of Illinois.

The VAC looks forward to the opportunity to reset its relationship with the Lake County Government and to work with the new County Board and County Board Chairwoman to find the best possible solution for the veterans and the tax payers of Lake County. Anything else would be to disregard the sentiment of President Lincoln and show disdain towards those men and women who have given their youth, their health, their bodies, and their minds for the citizens of this great State.

Very truly yours,



Andrew C. Tangen, Esq.
Superintendent

CC: Lake County Board
VAC Lake County
State Legislators
Federal Legislators
Veteran Service Organizations of Lake County

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