

Illinois



VFW

News

VOL. 63, No. 5

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CHAMPIONS

Negrate, Sieniawski Earn Top Honors in Illinois
for Voice of Democracy, Patriot's Pen





Department of Illinois

Fact Sheet

About us

The VFW traces its roots back to 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902) founded local organizations to secure rights and benefits for their service. Many arrived home sick or wounded. There was no medical care or veterans' pension for them and they were left to care for themselves.

Vision

Ensure that veterans are respected for their service, always receive their earned entitlements, and are recognized for the sacrifices they and their loved ones have made on behalf of this great country.

Mission

To foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts. To serve our veterans, the military and our communities. To advocate on behalf of all veterans.

Get in Touch

Phone: 217-529-6688

Facebook: VFW State of Illinois

Email: vwil@vwil.org

2024/2025 metrics

\$280,230 Service Members Assistance
\$44,676 Military Appreciation Programs

191,825 Total VFW/AUX Volunteer Hours

82 Scholarships and Help A Hero
\$386,918 Awarded Scholarship

1,439 Voice of Democracy Student Participation

209,000 Poppies Distributed

4,288 Patriots Pen Student Participation

46,342 VA Claims Processed
\$102,082,288 Amount Recovered

Did You Know?

34,150 Members as of June 30, 2025

December 11, 1920 Charter Date

2025-2026 Eugene Blackwell
State Commander

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STATE COMMANDER'S CORNER



Eugene Blackwell
Commander
Department of Illinois VFW

Greetings VFW Comrades and Auxiliary Members,

Advocating for veterans remains one of the most important missions of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Each year, the VFW Washington Conference brings representatives from every state to our nation's capital to meet directly with members of Congress and discuss issues affecting veterans, service members, and their families. This year's conference was held March 1-5, 2026, in Washington, D.C.

For nearly 75 years, the VFW's annual Washington Conference has given our organization the opportunity to speak directly with lawmakers and ensure that the voices of veterans are heard. One of the most anticipated moments of the conference is the testimony delivered by the VFW Commander-in-Chief before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

This year, Commander-in-Chief Carol Whitmore delivered powerful testimony in a standing-room-only chamber at the Dirksen Senate Office Building. The room was filled with VFW and VFW Auxiliary members proudly wearing their caps in support of our organization and its mission. Overflow rooms were also filled with members who had traveled from across the country and around the world representing all 52 VFW departments.

One of the key legislative priorities discussed during the conference was the Major Richard Star Act. This legislation would correct an unjust offset that impacts more than 50,000 medically retired combat veterans. Despite strong bipartisan support and continued advocacy, the bill again faced resistance in

the United States Senate, most recently from Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin. A similar motion last October was blocked by Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi.

The Major Richard Star Act addresses a long-standing issue where combat-wounded veterans who were medically retired see their earned military retirement pay reduced by their disability compensation. This is not about double compensation – it is about ensuring that those who were forced to leave military service because of combat-related injuries receive the full benefits they earned. As veterans, we understand the meaning of service and sacrifice, and the VFW will continue to advocate until this injustice is corrected.

While our national leaders work in Washington to advance legislation for veterans, our posts and auxiliaries across Illinois continue making a difference in their local communities, especially through our youth scholarship programs.

Throughout the Department, members reviewed hundreds of thoughtful essays submitted for the Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen competitions. The time and care our volunteers devote to reviewing these essays reflects the commitment our organization has to encouraging young people to think about citizenship, patriotism, and their role in our nation's future.

During our State Awards Banquet, students were recognized for their outstanding work and the meaningful perspectives they shared in their essays. Every participant should be proud of the effort they put into their submissions.

Congratulations to our state

Patriot's Pen winner from District 4, Michael Sieniawski. Our Voice of Democracy state winner this year is Victoria Negrete from District 16, and we look forward to cheering her on as she advances to the national competition.

During the banquet, attendees also heard from last year's state Voice of Democracy winner, Joseph Martinez. In addition, Dr. Jarmese Sherrod, the District 3 Voice of Democracy winner from 1994, addressed the audience and shared encouraging words with the students, reminding them of the importance of using their voices and pursuing their goals.

We are also excited for our Illinois youth representative to participate in the Spirit of America Youth Leadership Program and the Voice of Democracy National Recognition Program, scheduled for April 8-12, 2026, in Washington, D.C. These programs give young leaders the opportunity to learn more about our nation's history, government, and the responsibilities of citizenship.

Comrades, whether we are advocating on Capitol Hill, mentoring students through our scholarship programs, or supporting veterans in our local communities, the work we do continues to make a difference. Our strength as an organization comes from the dedication of our members who remain committed to serving veterans, their families, and our nation.

Thank you for the work you continue to do every day on behalf of veterans.

Illinois VFW News

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ILLINOIS VFW NEWS COMMITTEE

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 Brett Nila Committee Chairman
 Bobby Welch State Historian
 Barb Wilson Editor

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STATE OFFICERS

Commander	Eugene Blackwell	311	District 16
Sr. Vice	Rob Bailey	7452	District 19
Jr. Vice	Ryan Higginbotham	4266	District 13
Adj./Qm	Scott Swinford	4168	District 11
Judge Advocate	Jayson Hoffman	4763	District 10
Surgeon	Doug Jameson	1739	District 14
Chaplain	Gary Holmes	342	District 6
Chief of Staff	Robert Welch	2791	District 16
Inspector	Cathy Stubbs	7710	District 14
Jr. Past Cmdr	Maurice Bridges	4183	District 14
NCM	Matthew Claussen	2868	District 4

DISTRICT COMMANDERS

3	Zhi Chen	Post 5079	Chicago
4	Evamarie Duff	Post 2868	Brookfield
5	Mathius Carter	Post 12014	Crystal Lake
6	Rob Bland	Post 1461	Belvidere
7	David Long	Post 454	Bloomington
8	Kenneth Morey	Post 1422	Bushnell
9	John Finnegan	Post 5506	Marseilles
10	Joshua Seed	Post 755	Springfield
11	Rick Hobbs	Post 4495	Taylorville
12	Anthony Avers	Post 976	Troy
13	Robert Shehorn	Post 2055	Centralia
14	Amiee Louer-Wagoner	Post 7710	New Athens
15	Clarence Caraker	Post 3455	Anna
16	William Browne	Post 311	Richton Park
17	James Thorne	Post 7862	Arcola
18	Paul Cravens	Post 725	Mokena
19	Michaelangelo Di Cosola	Post 5815	Lombard



AUXILIARY PRESIDENT'S CORNER



Diane Ahrens
President
Department of Illinois
VFW Auxiliary

It has been an honor to represent the Department of Illinois as your Auxiliary President; to witness the wonderful accomplishments our Veterans of Foreign Wars and Auxiliary.

The second half of our year 2026 has been a whirlwind, January was full of opportunities to visit Districts hosting their Voice of Democracy Banquets, plus a Patriot Pen Pizza Party in Naperville. The Illinois Voice of Democracy Banquet is always a formal event, held in Springfield, it was a pleasure to see all the students who participated and represented their Posts and Auxiliaries from the State of Illinois.

Patriotism is alive and well. Congratulations Victoria Negrete, Midlothian Post 2580 and Auxiliary, 16th District, our first-place Voice of Democracy winner this year. Also congratulations to Michael Sieniawski, Prospect Post 1337, 4th District, our first-place Patriot's Pen winner this year.

Our 2025-2026 Theme was "How are you showing Patriotism and support for our Country".

Our 2026-2027 Theme will be announced soon so please be thinking ahead on introducing it to your local schools.

I was blessed to be able to attend National President Lois Callahan's Midwinter Cruise immediately after the VOD weekend. It was great to finally get warm; we left Fort Lauderdale, went to Key West, Bimini Island and back to Florida. Honestly getting thawed out was the best part, coming home to the warmer weather was a plus, although it didn't last too long.

I was able to attend several

District meetings after the "cruise", one was to 5th District, held at Antioch Post 4551, I was honored with Birthday wishes and singing, always feel the LOVE from the 5th.

Feb. 27-28, I was in Washington DC, at National President Lois's C.A.F.E. held at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It was a beautiful day; Alaska's President Willa Watts was phenomenal singing for the ceremony, she never disappoints. Thank You Willa!

My husband, Roger served two tours in Vietnam, he passed October 16, 2021, and he was an honoree in 2023. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) honors the memory of the men and women who served in the Vietnam War and later died as a result of their service. They honor and remember their sacrifice. I encourage you to research and honor your loved one.

March 1-3, I was able to stay in DC for the National VFW Legislative Conference, thanks to Missouri President, Patty Burge, sharing a room with me. It was a great opportunity to visit sites, attend the Bonus Army March, meet with Illinois Legislators staff, and Senator Duckworth. I was able to visit the Martin Luther King, Jr Memorial. There are so many memorials, and I try to visit a different one each time I go to DC, It was a beautiful sunny Sunday, then we walked to the Korean Memorial, Patty had not been before, it was a great day.

Of course, on Monday afternoon when they held the Bonus Army March it was cold and snowing, which was not nearly as cold as Northern Illinois, and it gave the memorial the look, I had been longing to see. My dad, James W.

Hallows served in Korea, he was a “Mosquito” Mechanic, for our Air Force veterans.

March is already going quickly, we are looking ahead to preparing for April Elections, and our June Illinois Convention. Because we are always planning months in advance, time truly does go quickly.

We are working with several VFW “Bachelor” Posts that have voted to initiate an Auxiliary, what a wonderful way to finish a year, so many positive and exciting opportunities. The Veterans of Foreign Wars and Auxiliary have such a strong Voice in our Nation, when we work together to bring honor and change to support our Military and Veterans, we are a force to be reckoned with.

This is why we recruit, retain and honor our members, give one another a Purpose and the WHY for us to serve.

Semper Fi



FROM THE JUNIOR VICE



Ryan Higginbotham
Junior Vice Commander
Department of Illinois VFW

Bonus Army Memorial March

Earlier this month leaders and delegates throughout the VFW converged on Washington DC for the National Legislative Conference, an annual pilgrimage since 1949. This is where we meet with our US Congressmen from Illinois to discuss our priorities and lobby for veterans' rights.

This year included an added bonus to our camaraderie. Many spend the short spurts of downtime taking in sights, such as the National Mall or changing of the guard at Arlington National Cemetery. This year on the evening of March 2nd, starting on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, with President Lincoln looking

on, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary braved the snow showers to conduct a tribute march throughout the war memorials. This included the World War 1, World War 2, Korea, Vietnam, and the Vietnam Women's Memorial. As we followed our "doughboy" reenactors carrying the American flag and VFW banner, each stop was paused to pay homage to those that have gone before us.

Before I move on let's fall back into the history behind this remembrance march that started in the summer of 1932. After the Great War and during the height of the Great Depression, many veterans were struggling.



Veterans and Auxiliary Members braved the cold to commemorate the 1932 Bonus Army march.

So launched the request for early payments of promised compensation. It was in the form of bonds that were to be paid in full, but not a dime until 1945. The compensation was known as the "World War Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924" and not a bonus though it was known as the "Bonus Act". There was also a clause that if the veteran died before 1945 their family could collect the payment sooner, this coined the phrase the "Tombstone Bonus". This compensation was due to wages lost by soldiers during the war. When the selective service was introduced at the beginning of World War 1, men were not just selected to serve in the military. Many were required to work in war factories and even be farmers for the government. However, these men were compensated at up to ten times the pay as a soldier fighting overseas and many of these men who worked in factories and farms were able to keep their jobs when the war was over.

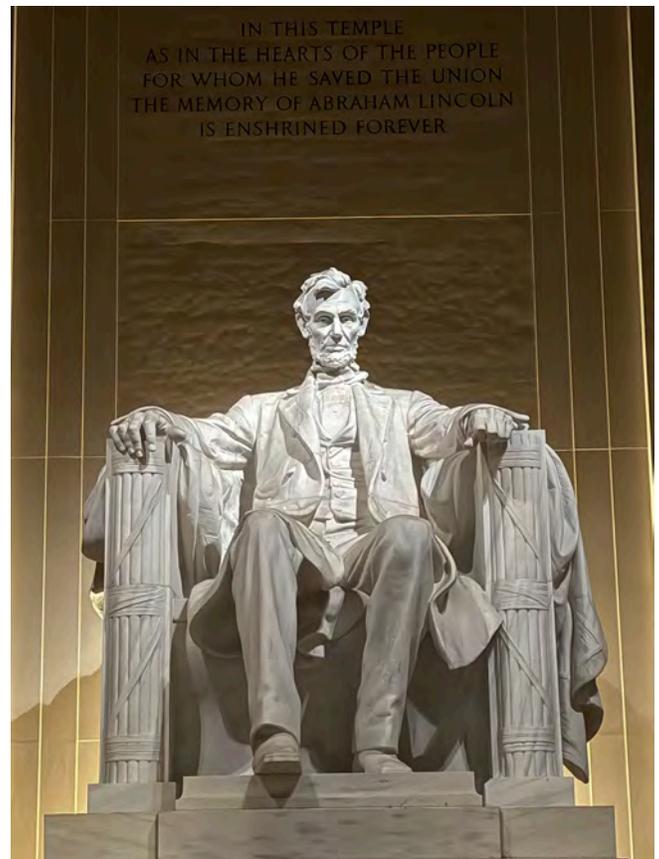
So, in early 1932 a movement began to take shape. Veterans from across the country, starting in Portland Oregon, began to make their way to the capital. Unknowingly to these veterans there were already veterans from Tennessee in Washington DC protesting for early payment of this promised compensation. The veterans called themselves the Bonus Expeditionary Force, (BEF), in recognition to their official name in the Great War, the American Expeditionary Force. Though this was shortened to just the "Bonus Army". 40,000 transcended upon Washington DC to fight and lobby congress for this early compensation. They formed small cities and encampments not just by themselves but with family by their side. For weeks they made their presence known and their objective clear. From

the middle of May until late July, they occupied sites throughout the city, waiting for Congress to vote in their favor. Even after the House of Representatives voted to provide the bonus, the Senate rejected it and even President Hoover threatened to veto the bill. Many left but thousands continued to stay and finally on July 28th President Hoover activated troops to forcibly remove the veterans from Washington. This, however, was met with resistance in which many injuries and two veterans died. One was named William Hushka, from Chicago. On August 2nd eight of his buddies, some in khakis, some in rags, carried the flag draped casket to his final resting place...Arlington National Cemetery.

Four years later, in 1936, those veterans finally got their promised compensation. Even after a veto from now President Franklin Roosevelt, Congress voted to do the right thing. This act further spawned the realization that veterans deserved more than just their mediocre pay when called to duty. In 1944 during World War 2, Congress passed the G.I. Bill to assist veterans striving for higher education. We can thank the veterans of the Bonus Expeditionary Force for many of the benefits we have today.

Now let's jump in our time machine with Doc Brown and go to present day 2026. While our mission may be different from those

in 1932 our actions are the same. When veterans come together, people listen and changes happen. Just last month when the VA implemented a short-lived rule that would reduce disability compensation based on reactions to medication, the VFW responded in full force and within a few days VA Secretary Collins rescinded the rule. This is why we paraded on the 2nd of March, to not only remember, but pay tribute to those brave veterans in 1932. It is up to us to remind our nation's leaders to "honor the contract". They never gave up and neither will we. When an outcome does not go in our favor we do not quit, nor do we falter. We roll up our sleeves and fight even harder, even longer, even more vigilant.



Starting on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, with President Lincoln looking on, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary braved the snow showers to conduct a tribute march throughout the war memorials.

Negrete, Sieniawski Earn Top Honors in Illinois for Voice of Democracy, Patriot's Pen

Answering the question of how they are “showing patriotism and support for our country”, Victoria Negrete and Michael Sieniawski were named the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars’ Voice of Democracy and Patriot’s Pen champions respectively during its annual Voice of Democracy and Patriot’s Pen banquet Feb. 7 in Springfield.

Negrete, a junior at Bremen High School in Midlothian, Illinois, and daughter of Jerry and Maggie Negrete, is the recipient of the John H. Emery Youth, Pageantry and Patriotism award in the amount of \$2,500.00.

Negrete, the District 16 champion, was sponsored by Midlothian Memorial Post 2580 and Auxiliary of Midlothian.

Sieniawski, an 8th grade student at Lincoln Middle School in Mt. Prospect, Illinois, and son of Ron and Sharon Sieniawski, is the recipient of the John H. Emery Youth, Pageantry and Patriotism award in the amount of \$1,000.

Sieniawski, the District 4 champion, was sponsored by Prospect Post 1337 in Mt. Prospect.

“Each of you is here tonight because you represent the very best from your respective Districts,” State Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford told the 17 District Voice of Democracy champions and four Patriot’s Pen state finalists. “Through your own hard work, you rose to the top at the previous levels of this competition. Remember each of you is a winner, that you have



Department Commander Eugene Blackwell and Department Auxiliary President Diane Ahrens present the John H. Emery Youth, Pageantry and Patriotism award to Victoria Negrete, the 2025-2026 Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars Voice of Democracy champion. Negrete, sponsored by Midlothian Memorial Post 2580, Midlothian, in District 16, received \$2,500.

strived to achieve when others fell short or didn’t even try.”

In addition to Negrete and Sieniawski, awards were presented to each of the remaining 16 District Voice of Democracy Champions as well as second, third, and fourth place State Patriot’s Pen students.

Patriot’s Pen Awards

• **Gaye Hines Memorial 2nd Place award** - Cassian Lim-Siewert, an 8th grade student at Alcott Elementary School in Chicago, is the recipient of the Gaye Hines Memorial 2nd Place award in the amount of \$500.

Lim-Siewert, the District 3 champion, was sponsored by Logan Avondale Post 2978 in

Chicago.

• **William Glenn Britt Memorial 3rd Place award** - Max Masters, a 7th grade student at Liberty Junior High School in Liberty, Illinois, is the recipient of the William Glenn Britt Memorial award in the amount of \$400.

Masters, the District 10 champion, was sponsored by Quincy Post 5129 in Quincy.

• **Raymond L. Moreland Memorial 4th Place award** - Katelyn Davin, an 8th grade student at Staunton Junior High School in Staunton, Illinois, is the recipient of the Raymond L. Moreland Memorial award in the amount of \$300.

Davin, the District 12

champion, was sponsored by Staunton Post 1241 in Staunton.

Voice of Democracy Awards

• **2nd Place: George R. Cramer & Ray R. Soden Scholarship Award** - Reyhan Onder, a 12th grade student at Geneseo High School in Geneseo, is the recipient of the George R. Cramer and Ray R. Soden Scholarship Award in the amount of \$1,500.00.

Onder, the District 8 champion, was sponsored by Don Cherry Post 5083 and Auxiliary, Geneseo.

• **3rd Place: Terry L. McKinney Memorial Award** - Claire Lu, a 9th grade student at Carbondale Community High School, Carbondale, is the recipient of the Terry L. McKinney Memorial Scholarship Award in the amount of \$1,250.00.

Lu, the District 15 champion, was sponsored by Carroll P. Foster Post 3455 and Auxiliary, Anna.

• **4th Place: Dale & Catherine Clifton Award** - Eileen Campbell, a 10th grade student at Hallstrom Cooperative in Rockford, is the recipient of the Dale and Catherine Clifton Award in the amount of \$1,000.00.

Campbell, the District 6 champion, Clifford E. Johnson Post 9759 in Loves Park.

• **5th Place: Johnson Phelps Post 5220 Auxiliary Award** - Layna Powers, a 12th grade student at Highland High School, Highland, is the recipient of the Johnson Phelps Post 5220 Auxiliary Award in the amount of \$750.00.

Powers, the District 12 champion, was sponsored by Highland Post 5694 and Auxiliary in Highland.

• **6th Place: Edward Jarnell**

& Joseph Ross Award

- Avery Unger, a 12th grade student at West Chicago Community High School in West Chicago, is the recipient of the Edward Jarnell and Joseph Ross Award in the amount of \$600.00.

Unger, the District 19 champion, was sponsored by Leon Richardt Post 6791 and Auxiliary, West Chicago.

• **7th Place: William Glenn Britt Memorial Award** - Khadija Pehlari, an 11th grade student at MCC Academy College Prep in Niles, is the recipient of the William Glenn Britt Memorial Award in the amount of \$550.00.

Pehlari, the District 4 champion, was sponsored by Tech. Sgt. William B. Snell Post



Victoria Negrete, the Department of Illinois Voice of Democracy champion, delivers her winning speech during the state banquet in Springfield Feb. 7.

7186 in Evanston.

• **8th Place: Dick Cosner Memorial Award** - Langston Ellis, an 11th grade student from Whitney M. Young



Department Commander Eugene Blackwell and Department Auxiliary President Diane Ahrens present the John H. Emery Youth, Pageantry and Patriotism award to Michael Sieniawski, the 2025-2026 Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars Patriot's Pen champion. Sieniawski, sponsored by Prospect Post 1337 in Mt. Prospect, received \$1,000.

Magnet High School in Chicago, is the recipient of the Dick Cosner Memorial Award in the amount of \$500.00.

Ellis, the District 3 champion, was sponsored by Chicago Bridgeport Post 5079 in Chicago.

• **9th Place: Vern and Lorraine Umphery, Post 6863 and Auxiliary Award** - Dallas Alvarez, a 12th grade student at Auburn High School in Auburn, is the recipient of the Vern and Lorraine Umphery, Post 6863 and Auxiliary Award in the amount of \$450.00.

Alvarez, the District 10 champion, was sponsored by Chatham-Auburn Memorial Post 4763 in Chatham.

• **10th Place: Robert C. Holysz Post 2200 Award** - Alexis McCullough, a 12th grade student at Bradley-Bourbonnais Community High School in Bradley, is the recipient of the Robert C. Holysz Post 2200 Award in the amount of \$400.00.

McCullough, the District 7 champion, was sponsored by Bourbonnais Post 9961 in Bourbonnais.

• **11th Place: Grant-Parkholme Post 9115 Award** - Gavin Storm, an 11th grade student at Arcola High School in Arcola, is the recipient of the Grant-Parkholme Post 9115 Award in the amount of \$375.00.

Storm, the District 17 champion, was sponsored by Walter Jones Post 2876 and Auxiliary in Villa Grove.

• **12th Place: West End Post 2004 award** - Daniel Proa, an 11th grade student at Grant Community High School in McHenry, is the recipient of the West End Post 2004 Award in the amount of \$350.00.



Michael Sieniawski, the Department of Illinois Patriot's Pen champion, delivers his winning speech during the state banquet in Springfield Feb. 7.

Proa, the District 5 champion, was sponsored by Fox River Post 4600 and Auxiliary in McHenry.

• **13th Place: Chester Spears Memorial Award** - Mary Hentges, a 12th grade student at Nashville Community High School in Nashville, is the recipient of the Chester Spears Memorial Award in the amount of \$325.00.

Hentges, the District 13 champion, was sponsored by Centralia Post 2055 and Auxiliary in Centralia.

Honorable Mention awards
Madison Wetzell, a 12th grade student at Bureau Valley High School in Manlius, is the recipient of the District 15 Runner-Up Award in the



State Senior Vice Commander Rob Bailey and State Senior Vice President Danielle Krull present the George R. Cramer and Ray R. Soden 2nd Place Award of \$1,500 to Reyhan Onder, District 8.

amount of \$300.00.

Wetzell, the District 9 champion, was sponsored by Wyanet Post 6634 in Wyanet.

Julianne Helbig, an 11th grade student at Okawville Junior-Senior High School in Okawville, is the recipient of the District 10 Runner-Up Award in the amount of \$300.00.

Helbig, the District 14 champion, was sponsored

by Okawville Post 5596 in Okawville.

Hailey Gordon, a 12th grade student at Lincoln-Way West High School in New Lenox, is the recipient of the Sharon L. Edwards Memorial Runner-Up Award in the amount of \$300.00.

Gordon, the District 18 champion, was sponsored by Harry E. Anderson Post 9545

and Auxiliary in New Lenox.

Hailey Hood, a 9th grade student at Shelbyville High School in Shelbyville, is the recipient of the Chuck Slack Memorial Award in the amount of \$300.00.

Hood, the District 11 champion, was sponsored by Shelby County Post 4829 and Auxiliary in Shelbyville.



District 7 Senior Vice Commander Justin Penrod and District 7 President Diane Hawk present the Terry L. McKinney Memorial Third Place Award of \$1,250 to Claire Lu, District 15.



District 11 Commander Rick Hobbs and District 11 President Donna Brown present the Dale & Catherine Clifton 4th Place Award of \$1,000 to Eileen Campbell, District 6.



District 3 Commander Zhi Chen and District 3 Auxiliary President Deborah Kirby Poczatko present the Johnson Phelps Post 5220 Auxiliary 5th Place Award of \$750 to Layna Powers, District 12.



District 19 Senior Vice Commander Steve Hunter and District 19 President Vicki Cobbett present the Edward Jarnell and Joseph Ross 6th Place Award of \$600 to Av-ery Unger, District 19.



Jeff Britt and Laurie Lesperance present the William Glenn Britt Memorial 7th Place award of \$550 to Khadija Pehlari, District 4.



District 7 Senior Vice Commander Justin Penrod and District 7 Auxiliary Senior Vice President Nancy Spraker present the Dick Cosner Memorial 8th Place Award of \$500 to Langston Ellis, District 3.



District 3 Senior Vice Commander Antonio Munoz and Past Department President Patricia Martyn present the Vern & Lorraine Umphery, Post 6863 and Auxiliary 9th Place Award of \$450 to Dallas Alavarez, District 10.



National Judge Advocate General Ronald Rusakiewicz and National Auxiliary Membership Ambassador Michael Maruszak present the Robert C. Holysz Post 2200 10th Place award of \$400 to Alexis McCullough, District 7.



District 4 Commander Evamarie Duff and Past District 4 Commander Eric Morales present the Grant-Parkholme Post 9115 11th place award of \$375 to Gavin Storm, District 17.



Past State Commander Maurice Bridges and Past Department President Cindy Watters present the West End Post 2004 Memorial 12th Place award of \$350 to Daniel Proa, District 5.



District 15 Commander Clarence Caraker and District 15 Senior Vice President Patricia Caraker present the Chester Spears Memorial 13th Place Award sponsored by Carroll P. Foster Post 3455 and Auxiliary in the amount of \$325 to Mary Hentges, District 13.



District 15 Commander Clarence Caraker and District 15 Auxiliary President Lori Crites presents the District 15 award of \$300 to Madison Wetzell, District 9.



Top left, District 10 Commander Josh Seed and District 10 Auxiliary President Karen Hirstein presents the District 10 sponsored award of \$300 to Julianne Helbig, District 14.

Above, District 16 Commander Bill Browne and District 16 Auxiliary President Irma Davis present the \$300 award in memory of Sharon L. Edwards, sponsored by David J. Edwards to Hailey Gordon, District 18.



Left, Past State Commander Russ Rieke and Mrs. Nancy Rieke present a \$300 award in memory of Charles Slack to Hailey Hood, District 11.



State Junior Vice Commander Ryan Higginbotham and State Junior Vice President Terry Adams present the Gaye Hines Memorial Second Place award in the amount of \$500 to Cassian Lim-Seiwert, District 3.



Jeff Britt and Laurie Lesperance present the William Glenn Britt Memorial Third Place Award in the amount of \$400 to Max Masters, District 10 .



District 15 Commander Clarence Caraker and District 15 Auxiliary President Lori Crites presents the Raymond L. Moreland Memorial Fourth Place award of \$300 to Katelyn Davin, District 12.



Ronald "Ron" Rusakiewicz, National Judge Advocate General of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., offers words of encouragement to the 17 Voice of Democracy District Champions and the four Patriot's Pen state finalists during his remarks at the state banquet Feb. 7 in Springfield.



Gerald Weidner shares with the Lawrence County Board their letter of intent and petition to create a Veteran's Assistance Commission (VAC) in Lawrence County.

Lawrence County Board hears VAC proposal

**Story and Photo by Lacey Watt
Editor, The Daily Record**

Gerald Weidner, with many other veterans sitting behind him in support, shared their letter of intent and petition to create a Veterans' Assistance Commission (VAC) in Lawrence County.

Weidner said that the VAC program was approved by state legislators in 2006, and since then, only 52 counties have the program in place. VAC's mission is to provide support and services to veterans and their families, including financial assistance, claims support and finding community resources.

Those who are members of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)

have signed a letter of intent for the commission and have already assigned representatives from each organization, ready to proceed with the board's approval.

Weidner explained that its program in Lawrence County would prevent veterans and their families from having to leave more than an hour away in Effingham for support or across the Wabash in Indiana for help. The commission would also consist of a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer and then a veteran's service officer.

The veterans service officer would have to be someone who has served in the military and work full time. They would administer the program and help

connect veterans and their families with services and resources, guiding them along the way for benefits and more — something the veterans said they don't receive education on once they are done serving.

Also touching on the topic of funding, they discussed different ways to fund the commission, and if approved, the commission could also apply for grants from the state.

Weidner closed by giving the board the paperwork for consideration and highlighted that the sooner they can get the commission established, the sooner they can apply to the state's health board for additional resources to help local veterans.

Illinois VFW, Auxiliary Members Travel to Washington for Annual Legislative Conference

Members of the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary were among the hundreds of VFW members worldwide who attended the VFW annual Washington Conference, March 1-5 in Washington, D.C.

The purpose of the conference is to conduct organizational business and participate in the organization's largest yearly advocacy event.

"As a VFW member and advocate, I have been in House and Senate offices numerous times communicating with lawmakers on what veterans care about most," said VFW National Commander Carol Whitmore. "But none of those experiences compare to my task this week. Veterans benefits have come under attack with echoes from the 1930s, with some who have never worn the uniform claiming benefits are wasteful, or that the wear-and-tear of 20 years of war is somehow frivolous. The VFW resolutely fought against cuts then, just as we are today. Real lives are impacted by what we've come to advocate for, and real consequences await service members and veterans if Congress and administration leaders do not Honor the Contract."

The main event of the Washington Conference was the annual commander-in-chief's testimony, March 3, before a special joint hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs held at the Dirksen Senate Office Building.

"What weighs heaviest on my heart are the combat injured veterans who are accused of wanting to double dip when they have earned everything they are asking for: their full retirement pay and disability compensation without offset," Whitmore said. "It



Members of Illinois' delegation of VFW and Auxiliary Members, along with staff from the VFW Washington office, meet with U.S. Congressman Mike Bost during the annual legislative conference.

is unconscionable that Congress continues to stonewall this injustice, and we will not continue to stand by while their families pay the price of their war wounds. They didn't ask to be retired early; they were forced, and they are due every single dime of their earned benefits."

Whitmore discussed the VFW's top priorities for 2026 including:

- VA Community Care: Passing the Veterans' ACCESS Act of 2025 and the Foreign Medical Program Modernization Act of 2025.
- Concurrent Receipt: Passing the Major Richard Star Act.
- Veteran Suicide: Passing the Written Informed Consent Act and the Veteran Suicide Prevention Act.
- Brain Health Care: Passing the Innovative Therapies Centers of Excellence Act of 2025, the Blast Overpressure Research and Mitigation Task Force Act, the Precision Brain Health Research Act of 2025, and the Veterans

National Traumatic Brain Injury Treatment Act.

Whitmore also covered legislative efforts that would prohibit the exploitation of veterans by Claim Sharks, codify accredited claims representatives' access to service members in military Transition Assistance Program classrooms and ensure oversight and transparency of the VA presumption decision process as passed in the Honoring our PACT Act of 2022 (Public Law 117-168).

The VFW's annual Washington Conference is the culmination of the VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship program, which is currently in its 12th year. Fellows accompanied VFW advocates on Capitol Hill and employed the leadership and advocacy skills they have learned since beginning the program in October 2025. Together with their VFW delegations, each fellow discussed the importance of increasing the

Post-9/11 GI Bill book stipend with lawmakers and staff, leveraging their experiences as student veterans who commonly rely on fixed incomes.

On March 2, the evening before Commander Whitmore's testimony, the VFW and its partners from Grunt Style

Foundation and Irreverent Warrior convened at the Lincoln Memorial to tour our nation's war memorials, reflecting on the sacrifices of the generations before us and recommitting to advocate for our veterans and the benefits they have earned. Dubbed the

"Bonus Army Memorial March," the evening hike around the National Reflecting Pool served as a time to reinforce the VFW's mission for the week, while remembering our history and the fights that paved the way for our nation's warfighters.



Illinois VFW and Auxiliary Members braved the cold weather to join in the salute to the Bonus Army march on March 2.



Illinois VFW leaders meet with U.S. Congressman Sean Casten during the legislative conference.



Department leaders meet with U.S. Senator and fellow VFW member Tammy Duckworth during the legislative conference.

Post 981 Poppy Proceeds Help Veteran Support Groups

On the two Saturdays preceding Memorial Day Arlington Post 981 is given permission by supermarkets, drugstores, and hardware stores in Arlington Heights, Buffalo Grove, and Long Grove to distribute Buddy Poppies and accept donations from the public.

During December the proceeds from 2025 were given to three veteran-helping organizations. Each organization selected received a check for \$2,500. These were: K9's For Veterans, located in Chicago, which trains and places service dogs; Bravehearts Therapeutic Riding and Educational Center, located in Harvard, which connects veterans and their families with horses; and Midwest Veterans Closet, located in North Chicago, which helps veterans needing furnishing for their dwellings.



Arlington Post 981 presents a donation from their 2025 Poppy Drive to Midwest Veterans Closet in North Chicago. Midwest Veterans Closet helps veterans who need furnishing for their dwellings. Midwest Veterans Closet was one of three organizations in the Chicagoland area which received a \$2,500 donation from the post.

District 15 Honors VOD Champion

District 15 honored its District Voice of Democracy Champion, Claire Lu, with a framed photograph following Lu's third place finish at the Department of Illinois Voice of Democracy banquet. Pictured, from left, are Lu's father, Chao, District 15 Commander Clarence Caraker, Lu, District 15 Auxiliary President Lori Crites, and Carroll P. Foster Post 3455 Commander James Hall.



Post 1739 Donates to Local Organizations

During the month of January, Belleville Post 1739 made donation of 40-pairs of winter socks to the Eagles Nest of St Clair County, a 26-bed transitional housing facility that supports an average of 100 homeless veterans annually.

The program provides trauma informed care and wrap around services that support veterans as they work to improve their situation.

A donation of 300 lbs. of non-perishable food items was delivered to the Inter-Faith Food Pantry in Belleville.

The Community Interfaith Food Pantry provides food to families throughout Belleville, Scott AFB and Swansea communities who are experiencing difficulty in meeting the demands of daily living.



About 40 pairs of socks were donated by Belleville Post 1739 to the Eagle's Nest of St. Clair County.



Some of the 300 lbs. of non-perishable food items which were delivered to the Inter-Faith Food Pantry in Belleville.

***To Submit Items for the
Illinois VFW News
Posts, Districts, and Aux-
iliaries wanting to submit
items for consideration in
the Illinois VFW News should
email items to***

**Editor Barbara Wilson at
barb.wilson2@outlook.com**

Next deadline is April 20

VFW Post 1422 Celebrates 100 Years of Service to Bushnell Community

Veterans, community members, and supporters gathered Sunday, March 8, to celebrate a historic milestone as VFW Post 1422 in Bushnell marked its 100th anniversary of service to veterans and the local community.

During the celebration, Eugene Blackwell, Department Commander for the Veterans of Foreign Wars Department of Illinois, presented an official proclamation from VFW Commander-in-Chief Carol Whitmore recognizing the post's century of dedication to veterans. The proclamation was presented to Post Commander Kenneth McCance.

The event honored the long history of the post and the generations of veterans who have passed through its doors since it was established around 1926.

When Post 1422 was founded nearly a century ago, America was a very different place. Communities like Bushnell were built on agriculture, railroads, and strong local values. In that environment, local veterans created a place where those who served overseas could gather, support one another, and continue serving their community.

For the past 100 years, VFW Post 1422 has remained an important part of Bushnell and McDonough County. The post has supported veterans and their families while also investing in local youth through scholarship programs, patriotic activities, and community outreach.

Beyond its programs, the post has long served as a gathering place for the community. Its hall has hosted weddings, reunions, fundraisers, and community



Department Commander Eugene Blackwell presents the Veterans of Foreign Wars Century Award to Bushnell Post 1422 Commander Kenneth McCance. The Century Award honors a century of dedication to veterans in the Bushnell community.

events, bringing residents together for generations.

The centennial celebration reflected that tradition. The event included a fish fry, live auction, and music, drawing veterans and residents together to celebrate the post's long history of service.

The legacy of Post 1422 was built by veterans from many generations – including those who served in World War II,

Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan – each continuing the tradition of service long after leaving the military.

As Post 1422 begins its second century, members and community leaders remain committed to the mission of VFW: advocating for veterans, mentoring young people, strengthening communities, and ensuring the sacrifices of those who served are never forgotten.

Print out and share this digital edition of the Illinois VFW News with your post members.

Rhine Post 2729 Completes Restroom Renovations

Rhine Post 2729 in Chicago received a grant from Home Depot for the renovation of the Men's and Ladies' restrooms.

The local Home Depot located in Bedford Park, Illinois, handled the renovations. The restrooms in the Post have not been updated since mid-1970 so it was long overdue.

The renovation took place while the Post was closed over the Christmas and New Years Holidays.

The Post was able to upgrade

to ceramic tiles on the floors and walls, installation of automatic paper towel dispensers along with new soap dispensers.

The automatic paper towel dispensers will be cost effective long-term versus fan-fold paper.

The ceilings and stall dividers received new paint colors. New vanities were also installed in both bathrooms. New ceiling fixtures replace outdated ones.

Both bathrooms received a new handicap toilet. The ladies' room

received two new standard toilets. The men's room did not receive new standard toilet since it was replaced several years ago.

They did experience a problem when it came to replacing the urinals. The urinals are full length and replacing them with wall mount would have required the plumbing to be completely redone taking several more weeks to complete. It was decided to keep the full-length ones that were replaced in the early 1980's.



Pictured, from left, Assistant Store Manager Josue Castro, Rafael Lara, Ethan Gabino, Kayvain Smith, and Post Quartermaster Richard Aguinaga.

Illinois VFW Post, Missouri Auxiliary Team Up for Super Bowl with a Vet at Jefferson Barracks

On Sunday, Feb. 8, 2026, Commander Valerie Young of VFW Post 3480, joined Ms. Rosaline from the Washington, Missouri VFW Auxiliary and

several volunteers to deliver pizza and wings to in-patient veterans at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis, Missouri.

“We are incredibly grateful

to VA staff members Marcena Gunter, Lulu Lang, and Ms. Emma for their unwavering support in making this annual event possible,” she said.



Valerie Young, Commander of the Capt. Horace Burke Post 3480 in East St. Louis, along with Rosaline from the Washington, Missouri VFW Auxiliary and other volunteers made Super Bowl Sunday a little more “Super” for veterans at Jefferson Barracks VA hospital.



VFW Post 3480 Partners with Local Organizations to Serve Community in Honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In collaboration with local church, New Life Community Church ESTL, VFW Post 3480 Commander Valerie Young, Community Lifeline, and AKA served by inventorying, organizing and separating clothing to later donate to the homeless community on Jan. 19, 2026 in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.



Illinois Veterans Converge on Springfield to Meet with Legislators During Veterans Legislation Day

Veterans from Veterans Service Organizations across Illinois converged onto Springfield to engage with legislators talking about legislation which directly impacts veterans and their families Feb. 25.





First Responders Take the Plunge for Special Olympics

By Rich Lawrence

On Feb. 20, Kahokian Memorial VFW Post 5691 hosted the annual Law Enforcement Polar Plunge in support of the Special Olympics Torch Run.

Area first responders, local Jaycees, and students from surrounding communities braved the icy water, drawing cheers from supporters gathered along the shoreline.

The event is part of the statewide Law Enforcement Torch Run efforts that raise funds and awareness for Special Olympics athletes. Proceeds help provide year-round sports training, competitions, and inclusion programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Despite chilly temperatures, participants embraced the spirit of the event — proving once again that community support runs deeper than the cold.



Brave plungers celebrate after completing the challenge.



Community members cheer on participants during the fundraiser.

Bloomington Post 7539 Collects Items for Homeless Veterans

Members of Bloomington VFW Post 7539 collected donated supplies for homeless veterans during February. Pictured are Randy Winters, Brandt Leishner, John Bryla, Ed Aubin, Tom Czajka, Spero Argyris, John Brodzik, Larry Rogers, and Cliff Hall.



Going the Extra Mile to Help Neighbors in Need During January Winter Storm

With temperatures dipping below zero and snow blanketing the area Jan. 26, Capt. Horace Burke Post 3480 Member Koran Payton and fellow neighbors went the extra mile to clear driveways and sidewalks, making it safer for everyone to get in and out of their neighborhood. According to his wife, Courtney, Koran is never afraid to get his hands dirty, always willing to lend a helping hand, and truly shows up for the community.

FROM THE VAC LIAISON



Doug Jameson
VAC Liaison,
Department of Illinois VFW

Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul has announced the next webinars offered by the AG's office of Military and Veterans Rights Bureau. These webinars will share important information designed to assist members of the veteran and military community, public and private employers and Human Resource professionals.

The Informational Webinar for Veterans Assistance Commissions (VACs) will provide an overview of the Illinois Military Veterans Assistance Act (MVAA) (330 ILCS 45). The webinar will cover the role of Veterans Assistance Commissions and county boards in the administration of benefits for military veterans and their families. Veteran Service Organizations, county Veterans Assistance Commissions, State's Attorney offices and county board members are encouraged to attend. The MVAA webinar will be held on April 16, 2026, at 11:00 a.m.

The Illinois Service Member

Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (ISERRA) Webinar will provide an overview of ISERRA (330 ILCS 61), including the types of qualifying military service, the employment protections and reemployment rights for members of the National Guard, Reserves and Federal Auxiliaries while completing their military requirements. The discussion will include health insurance and pension protections available to service members as well as military leave for service members who are employees of qualifying public employers. Human Resources professionals, Union representatives, attorneys who practice employment law, service members and their families are encouraged to attend. The ISERRA webinar will be held on May 13, 2026, at 10:00 a.m.

The What to Know About Veteran Consumer Scams Webinar will provide an overview of common veteran scams, how to spot them and what to do if you have encountered one. Service members, veterans, their families, and advocacy organizations are welcome to attend. The webinar will be held on July 15, 2026, at 10:00 a.m.

To RSVP, please register via the links below or contact special.events@ilag.gov. I also encourage you to email questions in advance so we can be responsive to the issues you are facing.

How to enroll:

To register for a webinar, click on the Zoom registration link and you will be directed to the registration site. Once you are registered, you will receive the log-in information including call-in information (if needed). If you need assistance

registering or to request reasonable accommodations, please contact Theresa Geary at special.events@ilag.gov or 1-866-376-7215. Individuals with hearing or speech disabilities can reach us by using the 7-1-1 relay service.

Informational Webinar for Veterans Assistance Commissions (VACs) Registration Link:

Thursday, April 16, 2026
11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Register in advance for this webinar:

https://ilattorneygeneral-gov.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_6DEfwAapStGYSQo7zG_yIA

Illinois Service Member Employment & Reemployment Rights Act (ISERRA) Webinar Registration Link:

Wednesday, May 13, 2026
10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

Register in advance for this webinar:

https://ilattorneygeneral-gov.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_z49_EMtiTB6fnAp0AdRsYQ

What to Know About Veteran Consumer Scams Webinar Registration Link:

Wednesday, July 15, 2026
10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

Register in advance for this webinar:

https://ilattorneygeneral-gov.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_VVzVgNkftNixVWFDws17Tg

For questions on the content of the presentations or to reach our Military and Veterans Rights Bureau, please call 1-800-382-3000 or email mvrbb@ilag.gov.

National Guard Officer Retires from Army After 21 Years, Continues Service with VFW

Maj. Jennifer Hillyer of Springfield retired after 21 years of military service to our state and nation in the Illinois Army National Guard in a Jan. 9 ceremony at the Northenders Veterans of Foreign Wars VFW Post 10302, where she now serves as Junior Vice Commander.

"She is always all about giving back to others," said Col. Jeff Hicks, the Illinois National Guard's Deputy United States Property and Fiscal Officer - Army, who presided over the retirement ceremony. "She digs deep within herself to do more."

Hillyer retired as the Deputy Supervisory Logistics Management Specialist for the U.S. Property and Fiscal Office at Illinois National Guard headquarters on Camp Lincoln. She started as an enlisted Soldier, rose to the rank of staff sergeant in the first part of her career, then commissioned and rose again through the ranks retiring as a field grade officer.

Hillyer deployed twice to Iraq during her career, as the Support Operations Transportation Officer assigned to the 232nd Combat Support Sustainment Battalion in 2020-2021 and as an NCO team leader with the 3637th Maintenance Company in 2007-2008. She held two company commands, commanding the Paris, Ill.-based 1544th Transportation

Col. Jeff Hicks, the Deputy United States Property and Fiscal Officer Army, presents Maj. Jennifer Hillyer with a framed American Flag upon her retirement from the Illinois Army National Guard after 21 years of service.

Co. and a company within the Rock Island Arsenal-based 6th Battalion, 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade.

"I feel indebted to the Soldiers. It is really about the people you served with," Hillyer said. "People say that being a commander is the best position in the Army - and it is." She said she loved putting the Army uniform on everyday and serving Soldiers.

Hicks presented Hillyer with the Meritorious Service Medal in recognition of her more than two decades of service. Hillyer continues to serve her community after retirement as the Junior Vice Commander of Northenders VFW Post 10302.

Hillyer thanked those she served with in the Illinois National Guard, retired and active, her "VFW family," and her family by blood and marriage - especially her parents and brother. "When I enlisted, you were so mad," she said. "But now you are so proud."



Illinois Army National Guard Maj. Jennifer Hillyer (right) holds her friend, Sgt. 1st Class Misty Mesecher after Hillyer's retirement ceremony on Jan. 9 at the Northenders Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 10302 in Springfield. Hillyer retired after 21 years of military service but continues to serve her community as the Junior Vice Commander of VFW Post 10302.



Olney VFW Honors 102 Year Old World War II Vet

It took nearly 80 years after he became eligible for membership, but Robert D. Sayre, a U.S. Army veteran of World War II, is now a member of Olney Post 4226.

At 102 years old, two weeks after a birthday drive-by celebration, Sayre became the newest member of the post.

He was born Jan. 1, 1924 in Olney to Herman and Gladys Sayre and had one sister, Betty.

Robert recounted his military service in the U.S. Army from 1943-1946, serving in England, France, and Germany, as a field medic attached to 515th Field Artillery Battalion.

As the unit headed into Germany, the war was winding down but there was still some action. He said, "We weren't on the front line or anything." No casualties. Just minor medical needed.

When they learned the war was over, they were shipped back to England where they were put on a Liberty Ship home. They docked in New York and saw the Statue of Liberty. They were all very happy to be home.

For his military service, Doty received the American Campaign Medal, European African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with one Bronze Battle Star, Good Conduct Medal, World War II Victory Medal, three overseas service bars, and one Service Stripe.

After the War, he attended Eastern Illinois University for Accounting and decided he did not want to do accounting. He returned to Olney and worked as a typesetter for The Olney Times then the Olney Advocate. After

many years he opened his own printing shop. He completed his working career at AMF in the printing department.

He was married three times, Alean Slater, with whom he had a daughter, Pat Gaede, with whom he gained a stepson and had three daughters, and Ruth Schaub.

In addition he has nine grandchildren and 20 great grandchildren.

Right, Robert D. Sayre during World War II.

Below, At 102 years old, Robert Sayre was honored with a drive by birthday celebration and became the newest member of the Olney VFW Post 4226.



District 12 Patriot Pen, Voice of Democracy winners recognized

Story and Photos by Rich Lawrence

Collinsville Cahokia VFW Post 5961 and its Auxiliary hosted the District 12 Patriot Pen and Voice of Democracy awards ceremony on January 10, recognizing local student essay winners and honoring their achievements.

Kaytelyn Davis, representing Staunton VFW Post 1241, was named the District 12 Patriot Pen winner. Davis received a \$150 prize for her essay, which is part of the VFW's national youth scholarship program encouraging students to reflect on American values, citizenship, and patriotism.

The District 12 Voice of Democracy winner was Layan Powers, representing Highland VFW Post 5694 and its Auxiliary. Powers was unable to attend the ceremony, but her winning essay was read aloud by Nancy Reicke. Powers received a \$500 prize for her entry.

The Patriot Pen and Voice of Democracy programs are sponsored annually by the Veterans of Foreign Wars to promote civic responsibility and give students an opportunity to express their views through writing and public speaking. Local VFW posts and auxiliaries support the programs by hosting ceremonies and awarding scholarships to participating students.

At right, members of Collinsville Cahokia VFW Post 5961 and its Auxiliary pose during the District 12 Patriot Pen and Voice of Democracy ceremony on January 10. Voice of Democracy winner Layna Powers of Highland VFW Post 5694 was unable to attend; her \$500-winning essay was read by Nancy Rieke.



District 12 Patriot Pen winner Kaytelyn Davis, representing Staunton VFW Post 1241, holds her award during the ceremony hosted by Collinsville Cahokia VFW Post 5961 and its Auxiliary on January 10. Davis received a \$150 prize for her winning essay.



Central Leyden Post 5979 honors Young Marines as Patriot's Pen winners

At the recent training drill of Chicago's Own Young Marines, Central Leyden VFW Post 5979, awarded three certificates along with a medal and a check to the three top Patriot Pen essay entries, all Young Marines.

In attendance was the Post Commander Shawn Schroeder, his Adjutant Lorenzo Fiorentino and their Quartermaster and Young Marine Unit Commander Richard Wojewnik. Another VFW post 5979 member and Young Marine adult Volunteer/leader is Juan Martinez.

First place went to Private Jett Hoffman, second place went to Corporal Eryan Sanchez and third place went to Private Emilio Rodriguez. A \$300, \$200 and \$100 check was awarded.

Private Jett Hoffman's entry was sent up to VFW District 4 for judging at the District level.

This took place at the Chicagoland Veterans Campus

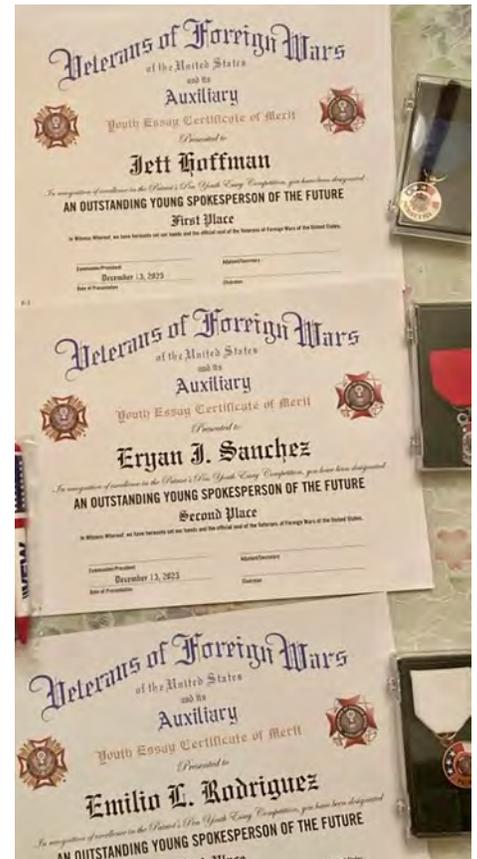
in Addison Illinois, where the Young Marines will begin training monthly.

The unit whose name is currently Chicago's Own Young Marines, has officially changed its name to "Chicagoland", which took place in January.

There are currently 26 Young Marines in the unit, eight of those are young ladies, 1/3 of the unit is from within the city, the other Unit members are from the surrounding suburbs.

The unit trains twice a month every second and fourth Saturday from 9 AM to 3 PM. Their headquarters are located in River Grove at Central Leyden VFW Post 5979, starting in January they will begin training once a month at the campus.

VFW Post 5979 Adjutant Lorenzo Fiorentino is the president and founder of the Chicagoland Veterans Campus in Addison, Illinois.



Above, Central Leyden Post 5979 honor it's Patriot's Pen essay winners.

Below, Chicago's Own Young Marines go through monthly training. Three students were honored as post-level Patriot's Pen winners.





***District 4 Color Guard
Presents Colors at
Chicago Fire Home Opener***

The Fearless District 4 Color Guard is off to a great start by representing America and the VFW by presenting the colors at the Chicago Fire home opener.

Illinois VFW, Auxiliary Eulogize President Abraham Lincoln during annual ceremony

The Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary paid tribute to President Abraham Lincoln at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois, Feb. 7, as part of the organization's annual Eulogy to Abraham Lincoln ceremony. The Eulogy ceremony is one of the events attended by junior high and high school students attending the VFW's annual Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen state banquet.

"There was a boy born in the dust and silence of the countryside, in a little log cabin, to a modest family of uneducated hard-working laborers," said National VFW Judge Advocate General Ron Rusakiewicz, in describing Abraham Lincoln's youth. "Life was hard, yet simple. Days were filled with hard work and a yearning to survive. Yet that boy

rose up out of the dust and trees in search of something more. That boy grew up, and took America by the hand, guided it through one of the most important changes in history."

Abraham Lincoln was driven, but it was his charisma that made him such a likeable man. He also has the gift of speech, writing and delivering in a manner that resonated with many. His path to Presidency came at an important and opportune time. Abraham Lincoln preserved the Union. Without him, this country would be different. Most importantly Abraham Lincoln changed this country, in a time when opposition could not be fiercer, by freeing the slaves.

Lincoln was born on Feb. 12, 1809 in Hardin County, Kentucky. At the age of 10, his mother

passed away. Life was filled with work, and not much time for education. It is said that Lincoln maybe received one year of formal education, split between five schools, spanning his childhood.

"Lincoln was driven by a thirst for knowledge. He borrowed every book in the neighborhood and when those were done, he went on to read "Revised Statutes of Indiana",," said Rusakiewicz. "In 1831 at the ripe age of 22, Lincoln ended up in New Salem, Illinois waiting for a friend. While he was there, an election was taking place in town. One of the clerks had taken ill and there was no one else who could write, Lincoln could and was immediately sworn in as clerk. This event sparked Lincoln's interest for politics."

Lincoln stepped away from politics and spent about five years



The 17 District Voice of Democracy Champions and four Patriot's Pen state finalists gather around the Lincoln bust at Oak Ridge Cemetery ahead of the Eulogy to Abraham Lincoln ceremony Feb. 7

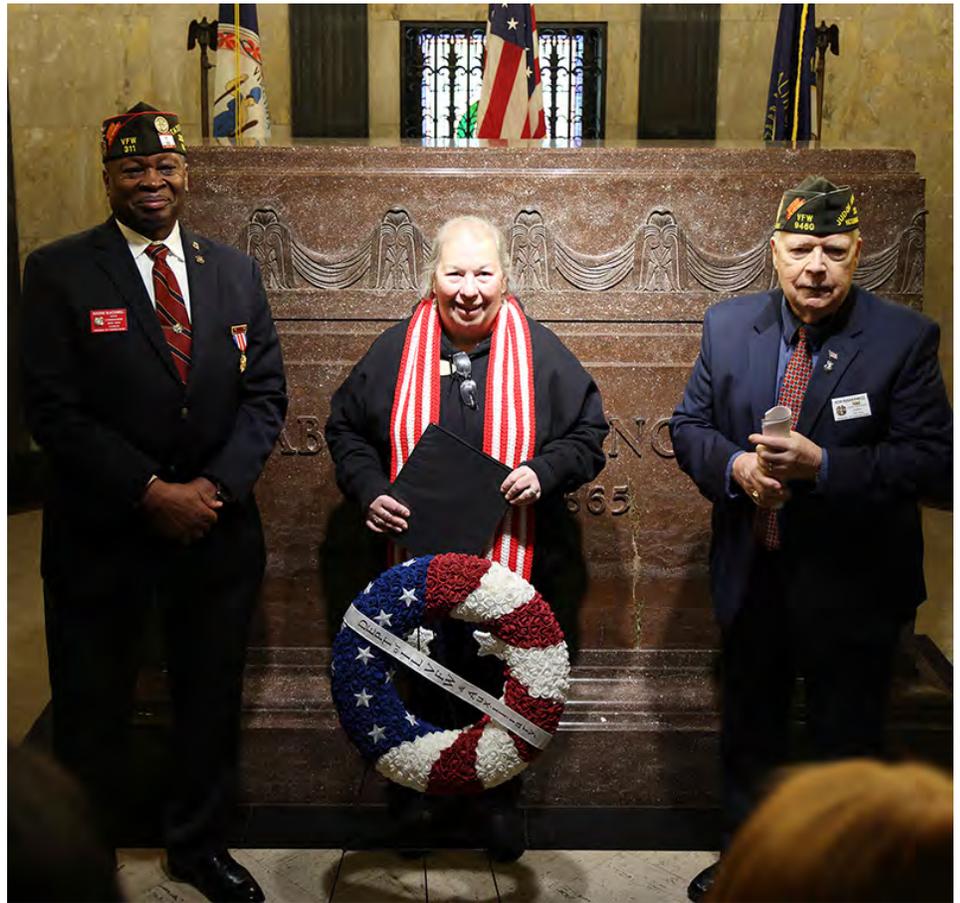
focusing on work rather than political matters. A political crisis gave him a passion to run for office.

“In 1854, Abraham Lincoln’s political rival Stephen A. Douglas pushed a Bill through congress for reopening the entire Louisiana Purchase to slavery, also allowing Kansas and Nebraska to decide for themselves regarding slavery in those territories,” he said. “Douglas and Lincoln conducted a series of debates. Lincoln and Douglas engaged in many heated political arguments, yet they were closer in their views than they seemed. Neither really wanted to end slavery and neither were really proslavery. But Lincoln, unlike Douglas, insisted that Congress must exclude slavery from the territories.”

Lincoln once said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe the government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.” Both were excellent speakers and expert debaters. Lincoln eventually won and on May 18, 1860, Lincoln was nominated and started a run for Presidency. He received no votes from the south, but the popular votes were so widely distributed that Lincoln won the majority of votes in the Electoral College, which won him the Presidency.

“Before Lincoln became President, the country was in turmoil as to keep slavery or abolish it. It was an issue that was literally ripping this nation apart,” he said. “Even before Lincoln took office, South Carolina had seceded from the union. Soon after, six more Southern states seceded from the union.”

They called themselves the Confederate States of America. Although Lincoln respected them for sticking to their values, he could not stand by and watch the country divide in front of his eyes without doing something about



Department of Illinois VFW Commander Eugene Blackwell, Department Auxiliary President Diane Ahrens, and National Judge Advocate General Ron Rusakiewicz lay a memorial wreath at the tomb of President Abraham Lincoln during the ceremony Feb. 7.

it. Lincoln made his inauguration speech to a country divided, yet Lincoln held firm to the Union’s indestructibility. The country was divided and war finally broke out.

War continued from 1861 through 1865 with both sides fighting diligently. No other President has ever had to lead a country through a civil war. Then the Battle of Antietam in 1862 served to be the turning point for Lincoln and the Union. During this battle, the North pushed the South back across the Potomac River giving the North the upper hand. This gave Lincoln the incentive to once again offer them a deal and this time they took it. To this, the Government paid money and Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all slaves in confederate states. Ultimately the union was

preserved by the freeing of slaves, but Lincoln did not accomplish this single handedly.

“Lincoln surrounded himself with the smartest, most capable advisors, cabinet members and generals that he had the greatest confidence in,” he said. “Whether he agreed with what they had to say, he always gave them the chance to explain themselves.”

All his life he was hard working and diligent and people took notice, which gave Lincoln the respect of many around him. He spoke what was in his heart and what he felt was right. He did not veer from the words he spoke and people could trust him. His speeches and letters were so eloquent that many have withstood the hands of time and are still quoted today.

Although he did not deliver



speeches as well as he wrote them, the message rang out loud and clear. His most famous speech, The Gettysburg Address, might have only been a few minutes in length, but it spoke volumes and is one of them most quoted speeches, especially “and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth”.

“Lincoln was a charismatic, articulate, hardworking man that saved America by freeing the slaves and preserving the union,” Rusakiewicz said. “Without Lincoln, America would be different. Lincoln preserved the union by speaking to the minds and hearts of the citizens, and by developing a network of people who were capable of change. Unfortunately, Lincoln’s life was ended too soon. Lincoln’s greatness as a leader lay in setting a moral course for the nation to follow. By taking part in this observance, each of us reaffirms our belief in the course he set for our country.”



VFW Post 9284 Commander Al Brenke accepts a check from State Commander Eugene Blackwell and District 4 Commander Evamarie Duff during a recent District 4 meeting. The check represents a membership award the post received for being 99 percent in membership.

Monroe County funds veterans commission

Scott Woodsmall
Republic-Times

Two months after the Monroe County Veterans Assistance Commission was officially chartered, it received its first round of official funding last Tuesday.

Representatives of county, regional and state level VACs introduced themselves to commissioners during the Dec. 15 Monroe County Board meeting, although they were a few weeks too late to be scheduled into the Fiscal Year 2026 budget.

During that December board meeting, Illinois VFW State VAC Liaison Doug Jameson addressed the board, explaining that, as of the beginning of 2024, the state's Military Veterans Assistance Act requires counties to provide a minimum of .02 percent of the latest equalized assessed value of taxable county properties to support its VAC.

Last Tuesday, commissioners approved a resolution to provide \$115,000 from the county's general fund to support VAC operations in the current fiscal year, a move applauded by veterans in attendance.

Jameson expressed his "personal appreciation for all those behind the scenes who are making the vision a reality" on the VAC's Facebook page following the funding approval.

With a job posting for the position promising an \$80,000 salary for the superintendent of the new commission, the county's cost to fund the VAC will likely double at least when next year's agenda is approved.

To make up for an expected shortfall, commissioners noted there are a number of local veteran support organizations that may be able to contribute to the VAC in the meantime.

When updates to the Illinois Veterans Service Organizations State Charter Act went into effect Jan. 1, 2024, a number of county-level veterans assistance commissions have been established throughout the state.

VACs are responsible for supporting veterans and their



Pictured, from left, are Monroe County Commissioner Doug Garmier, Illinois VFW State Veterans Assistance Commission Liaison Doug Jameson, Chairman George Green, Commissioner Vicki Koerber and Waterloo VFW Post 6504 member Paul Smith following approval of a resolution Feb. 17 which partially funds the newly-chartered veterans organization for the current county fiscal year.

families through emergency financial assistance and other programs.

The commission is also able to assist veterans and their families with injury- or death-related claims, a process that can seem overwhelming to those not familiar with the process.

As explained in December, an individual representing a veteran's benefit claim must be accredited through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and be affiliated with a state-chartered organization such as a VAC.

Many times, those without a VAC to help out can have a large chunk of their benefit payouts taken by unauthorized legal representation – despite a statutory penalty of \$50,000 for non-accredited personnel engaging in veteran claims cases, according to St. Clair County VAC John Lawson.

While partial funding of the Monroe County VAC has been approved, there are other aspects still

to be solidified.

During the December meeting, representatives of the VAC requested rent-free office space to be provided by the county, although no specifics were mentioned then or last Tuesday.

During last week's meeting, Commissioner Vicki Koerber said she understood she was to be the official county liaison to the VAC, although she had not been notified of any of the commission's meetings in the past two months.

Jameson explained that to be an official liaison, one must be a military veteran.

As none of the current board members are veterans, that role remains unfilled at present.

There are other logistical aspects still requiring attention, such as publicly-available contact information and inclusion on the official Monroe County website.

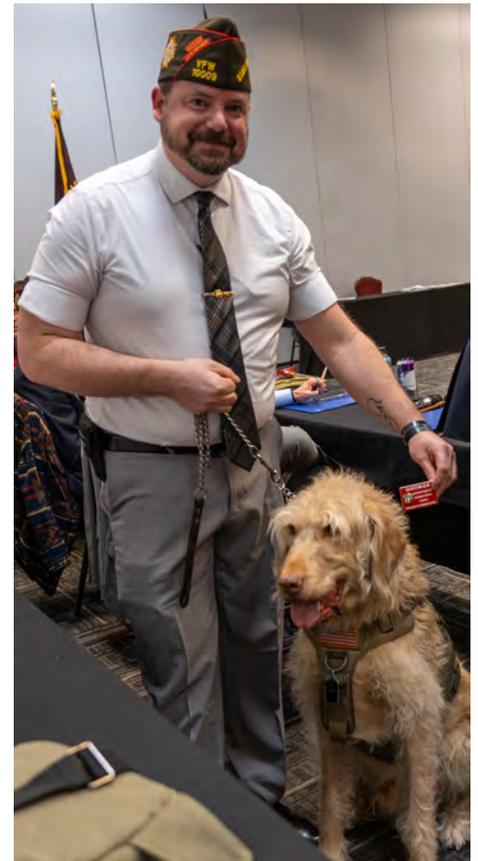
VFW Council Members Conduct Business during Mid-Winter Conference in February



Ron Rusakiewicz, National Judge Advocate General of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, addresses the Council of Administration Feb. 6.



Above, Patseyelizabeth Schreiber, the National Women Veterans Committee Chairperson, talks about the importance of having a national committee to address the needs of women veterans.



Right, George (seated) received his own name badge during the Council of Administration Meeting.



Ed Stefanak, Jr., Veterans of Foreign Wars Associate Director of Membership, leads a membership recruiting training class during the Council of Administration meeting.

During the Council of Administration meeting, Membership Chairman Mathius Carter presented Membership Awards to Posts achieving at least 99 percent in membership by Dec. 31.

Forty-five posts received a \$100 check.

981-4.....100.68 percent
 4831-4.....100.00 percent
 9284-4.....99.45 percent
 4308-5.....100.96 percent
 1304-6.....100.00 percent
 2223-6.....99.14 percent
 3878-6.....106.25 percent
 8455-6.....100.00 percent
 11019-6.....100.00 percent

454-7.....99.55 percent
 3510-7.....227.27 percent
 5212-7.....100.00 percent
 6026-7.....100.00 percent
 8350-7.....101.81 percent
 8890-8.....103.63 percent
 1232-9.....99.21 percent
 2602-9.....100.00 percent
 3666-9.....100.00 percent
 4323-9.....100.00 percent
 4835-9.....105.26 percent
 5506-9.....101.58 percent
 8324-9.....1.00.00 percent
 9016-9.....101.47 percent
 1756-10.....100.00 percent
 6871-10.....102.17 percent
 11463-10.....112.50 percent
 11524-10...107.14 percent

6190-11.....100.00 percent
 1299-12.....108.57 percent
 7678-12.....102.50 percent
 2244-13.....99.33 percent
 9153-13.....105.00 percent
 2698-14.....99.22 percent
 7682-14.....101.01 percent
 1567-15.....100.00 percent
 3455-15.....102.34 percent
 9763-15.....104.44 percent
 311-16.....99.67 percent
 8077-16.....102.94 percent
 3601-17.....99.36 percent
 7862-17.....100.00 percent
 725-18.....110.00 percent
 1336-18.....100.00 percent
 1197-19.....100.81 percent
 6663-19.....100.00 percent



District 4 Membership Awards.



District 5 Membership Awards.



District 6 Membership Awards.



District 7 Membership Awards.



District 8 Membership Awards.



District 9 Membership Awards.



District 10 Membership Awards.



District 11 Membership Awards.



District 12 Membership Awards.



District 13 Membership Awards.



District 14 Membership Awards.



District 15 Membership Awards.



District 16 Membership Awards.



District 17 Membership Awards.



District 18 Membership Awards.



District 19 Membership Awards.

Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary Has Fun, Conducts Council of Administration Meeting



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