

VAU

Veterans' Accountability Unit Annual Report

2023





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★ Letter from the VAU Acting Director ★

To the Governor, the Honorable Members of the General Assembly and the People of Illinois:



My name is Renysha Brown, and I am honored to submit this report on the activities and accomplishments of the Illinois Veterans' Accountability Unit (VAU). I am a two-time combat veteran having served in Desert Shield/Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom II and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel after 28 years of combined service between the US Army and the Illinois Army National Guard. I have experience working in various sectors of state and federal government.

During the last nine months of the state fiscal year (September 16, 2022, through June 30, 2023), the VAU made great strides in establishing an avenue for Veterans concerns to be addressed. Here are a few examples of how we are ensuring the voices of Veterans receiving services in the State of Illinois are being heard:

- Established policies and processes to implement the statutory functions of the VAU.
- Established training goals and objectives for VAU staff to be knowledgeable and properly equipped to handle the different issues that are presented to the VAU.
- Established a dedicated email address for veterans, contactors, and staff to use to communicate their compliments, recommendations, and complaints about the services received from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA).
- Established a fillable VAU Contact Form on the IDVA website that can be submitted directly to the VAU dedicated email address.
- Established a toll-free helpline for the convenience of being able to speak with someone and leave messages about the services they received from IDVA.
- Established a case tracking system for all complaints, inquiries, suggestions, and referrals.

These accomplishments thus far, are due to the dedication to service those who have served along with the desire and necessity to promote accountability. The VAU was established to improve and promote accountability within IDVA. Accountability has a tremendous impact on the delivery of services to our Nation's heroes. As a combat Veteran myself, I recognize the impact that deficiencies in Veteran services have on Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

As the inaugural Director of the VAU, I am committed to ensuring that fellow veterans and families are provided resources to assist with recommendations and concerns about veteran services provided in the State of Illinois. To assist in that effort, the VAU is seeking to establish three additional positions including an Executive Assistant and two Accountability Specialist. As we continue to work towards this goal, we recognize the significance of the mission and its impact on those who have served.

Renysha Brown

Acting Director, Veterans' Accountability Unit

★ Establishment of the Veterans' Accountability Unit ★

Authority

The Illinois Veterans' Accountability Unit (VAU) was formally created by Illinois Statute, 20 ILCS 2805/39, Public Act 102-695 effective June 1, 2022, and is established to receive complaints and recommendations from: veterans and other Illinois residents who seek services from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA); residents of Illinois Veterans' Homes, their families, and visitors; vendors and contractors of the IDVA; and staff of the IDVA.

In accordance with Illinois Statute 20 ILCS 2805/39, the Veterans' Accountability Unit functions independently of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs. The Director and staff of the Veterans' Accountability Unit have the authority to access all offices and facilities of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Veterans' Homes and shall have access to all information, documents, and personnel of the Department as needed to perform the duties of the Veterans' Accountability Unit.

In accordance with Illinois Statute 20 ILCS 2805/39, the Director of the Veterans' Accountability Unit may recommend changes to the Director of Veterans' Affairs concerning Department policies or practices based upon information learned or observations made by the Veterans' Accountability Unit staff during the course of their duties.

Mission Statement

The Illinois Veterans' Accountability Unit's mission is to ensure that veterans, staff and the public have an appropriate means to file complaints or make recommendations regarding policies and practices at the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs in order to promote and improve the safety, quality, and protections provided to Illinois Veterans and staff.

Purpose

The Veterans' Accountability Unit (VAU) supports the administrative structure necessary to accept compliments and recommendations, and fields general questions about the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) operations, policies, and procedures. The VAU also ensures all complaints, allegations, or incidents of possible misconduct, misfeasance, malfeasance, or violations of rules, procedures, or laws by any employee, service provider, or contractor of the IDVA are reported to the Office of Executive Inspector General for the Agencies of the Illinois Governor (OEIG).

★ Complaint Process ★

Methods of Complaining

Complaints may be received by the VAU through any method, including telephone, letter, fax, email, IDVA Intranet or in person. Complaints involving discrimination or sexual harassment must be in writing. Complaints and requests for assistance may come from any source, including IDVA managers, supervisors, employees, residents, or the public.

Upon receipt of a complaint, the VAU enters the complaint details into a log maintained by the VAU. The log includes information such as the date of the complaint, the person making the complaint (if known) and a summary of the complaint. The Director of VAU promptly notifies the OEIG of all complaints received, as required.

Notification to Officials

The Director of the VAU reports notifications of all complaints, allegations, or incidents of possible misconduct, misfeasance, malfeasance, or violations of rules, procedures, or laws by any employee, service provider, or contractor of the IDVA, to the OEIG. The OEIG assesses the complaints, allegations, and incidents and determines whether to investigate, refer to the appropriate agency, refer to any appropriate law enforcement agency, request a response from the Department to the complaint, allegations, or incident, or refer to the VAU to conduct further inquiry or review if necessary.

VAU Preliminary Steps of Inquiry

After VAU receives a complaint referred by the OEIG, preliminary steps are taken for clarification and to determine the course of action. Preliminary steps can consist of (this list is not all inclusive):

- contacting the complainant,
- obtaining documentation pertaining to the complaint,
- reviewing policies and procedures,
- accessing databases,
- conducting online searches, and
- contacting witnesses.

Courses of Action

Once preliminary steps have been taken to gather further information, the course of action taken is dependent on the information contained in the complaint. The VAU may resolve the complaint with the complainant upon intake or refer the complaint to the appropriate IDVA management section or to another agency (if the complaint regards another agency). If the issue or complaint is referred back to IDVA management, IDVA management has 10 days to provide the VAU with a detailed response and supporting documentation of how the situation was resolved and if any discipline was involved. If the VAU is reviewing a complaint and comes across a bigger-picture or systemic issue, it will consult with the OEIG before proceeding further. Results of all VAU inquiries may be shared with the OEIG.

Recommendations

Upon completing an inquiry or review, the VAU:

- Advises the IDVA Director and appropriate agency managers, in writing, of deficiencies related to programs and operations and recommends corrective actions.
- Recommends activities to promote economy and efficiency.
- Provides the IDVA Director, and/or other IDVA managers with accurate and timely information on all relevant topics.

★ VAU Access ★

Under the law, the VAU shall have full access to any, and all, IDVA records, data, or other information deemed necessary to carry out their duties. All agreements, contracts, etc. shall include a provision to this effect. The VAU is also authorized to request information or assistance from other governmental or private entities as necessary. All IDVA parties involved will cooperate, and provide records, information, interviews, or other assistance as requested. The IDVA Director and IDVA staff will not prevent or prohibit the VAU from initiating, carrying out, or completing any audit, investigation, or other function of the VAU.

★ Site Visits ★

The VAU visits the IDVA facilities and/or offices, Illinois Veterans' Homes and the Illinois Veterans' Service Offices around the state in an effort to be visible and create another avenue for complaints, and recommendations to be addressed. During these site visits, employees, residents of the homes, and contractors can provide recommendations on how to improve the Veteran Home and office environment, employee relationships, current policies and procedures and morale of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs. Site visits also provide an opportunity for veterans and staff to file a complaint with the VAU in person which increases the level of trust that issues and concerns are being heard and addressed appropriately.

★ Confidentiality ★

The VAU maintains confidentiality of investigations, including files and reports, and complainant and witness identities, to the maximum extent allowable, but must disclose this information to the OEIG. If any investigative information, including files and reports, is requested by any person or entity outside of the VAU, the VAU must first consult the OEIG.

★ VAU Inquiries, and Complaints Received in SFY 2023 ★

The VAU received a total of 39 inquiries and complaints during Illinois State Fiscal Year 2023. 27 of the 39 were determined to be complaints and the remaining 12 were questions or inquiries.

The 12 questions, inquiries or suggestions received by the VAU ranged anywhere from veterans needing assistance with housing and spouses of veterans wanting to know what benefits they were entitled to because the veteran was not providing financial support, to how to get a veteran ID Card or hunting and fishing license, how to contact their primary care provider at the Hines VA Medical Facility, and where to obtain assistance with filing their taxes.

All complaints, allegations, or incidents of possible misconduct, misfeasance, malfeasance, or violations of rules, procedures, or laws by any employee, service provider, or contractor of IDVA were reported to the OEIG for review. The OEIG sent 26 of the complaints back to the VAU Acting Director to handle as she deemed necessary.

Of the 26 complaints handled by the VAU,

- 8 were referred to other state or federal agencies for resolution,
- 6 concerned issues at Illinois Veterans' Homes,
- 7 concerned the service received at Veteran Service Offices, and
- 5 concerned issues at the IDVA Central Office.

★ Summary of Complaints ★

Illinois Veterans' Homes

- ★ A former IDVA employee claimed retaliation as the reason for being fired.
 - Due to ongoing litigation initiated by the former employee, the VAU could not be involved at this time.
- ★ An anonymous complaint was received expressing concern that an IDVA employee treated a veteran on hospice and their family with disrespect after learning that the family stayed overnight in an empty room near the veteran.
 - The VAU informed the Director of IDVA of the complaint, with a request for IDVA to follow up with how the situation was addressed.
 - IDVA determined that there was not enough evidence for grounds of disorderly conduct or conduct unbecoming of an IDVA employee. However, the employee was counseled on professionalism, stress management and communication.
- ★ An employee called and stated that they currently had 41 residents and only 3 aides working and that this was an unsafe environment for the residents and the aides. Particularly, the complaint alleged that the majority of residents required a Sara Lift or a Hoyer Lift, which require 2 people to operate by law for the safety of the resident and the aides that are assisting the resident. There was another aide that was assigned to work in that unit, but they were sent somewhere else to work.
 - The VAU requested IDVA policy on the staff to veteran ratio in the homes dependent upon the type of care that the veteran needs as well as the requirements to operate the equipment named in the complaint.
 - Staffing logs for that day were checked. It was determined that the facility was staffed for the number of residents within the requirements of the policy.
- ★ An employee complained that one of the buildings was operating below minimum acuity set by the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH).
 - VAU learned that there are direct care staffing levels that IDVA targets, however there is no "minimum acuity" set by IDPH.
 - A review of staffing records showed that the building was staffed within the target levels.
- ★ An IDVA employee complained that they were not given the option to have a TB test by their primary care physician (PCP). The employee was told that it had to be done in house but did not believe that this was appropriate or that it was required as part of employment.
 - The VAU obtained and provided the complainant with two policies concerning TB testing, but neither contained information on whether it was acceptable for an employee to have the testing completed by their PCP.
 - Upon further inquiry, the VAU learned that IDVA accepts a TB test from a PCP if it is within the timeframe of the testing requirement. Chest Xray's for those who are positive reactors are also accepted from a PCP.
 - The VAU recommended that IDVA clarify this practice in writing to avoid confusion or similar complaints in the future.

- ★ The VAU received a complaint regarding a veteran who applied to an Illinois Veterans' Home through a power of attorney (POA). The veteran's application was accepted, and the veteran was offered a space at the home. The veteran toured the home a month later and decided to accept the space offered. Due to the time that lapsed, medical documentation had to be resubmitted. Approximately six weeks later, the POA was notified by phone that the veteran had been denied admission due to an issue noted on his background check. The POA was upset because nothing about a background check was mentioned when the veteran was initially offered space at the home.
 - The VAU requested information on whether the room that was offered initially was offered in error, and reviewed the policy on background checks for veterans applying to a home as well as the policy on how long the doctor notes are good for when applying for admissions to a home.
 - The VAU learned that an error was made by the staff when the original offer was made without the required background check.
 - No discipline was imposed. Adjustments were made to the review process and notes were added to the admissions checklist that include the date the background check is requested.
 - The VAU informed the POA of an appeal process that could be followed once the denial letter was received per the policy.

Veteran Service Offices

- ★ The VAU received a complaint regarding a veteran service office hours of operations. The complainant stated that they attempted to contact the VSO for more than a month regarding the veteran discount for their license plates. The complainant stopped by the VSO office to obtain the letter needed and was told that they could not come into the building without an appointment and no one offered to take the complainant's information to provide to the VSO. The complainant stated that their complaint was not against one particular person but that the process and procedures set up to serve the veterans of Illinois are broken and need some attention.
 - The VAU was informed that an office-by-office assessment of the appropriate ratio of walk-in and appointment time offerings to address issues such as this one was being conducted.
- ★ A veteran called and complained that they never received the \$100 benefit they were informed they would receive years ago.
 - IDVA management was notified of the complaint and was asked to review the veteran's payment history and follow up with the veteran and the VAU on the status of payment.
 - It was discovered that the veteran had not applied for that benefit. IDVA management sent the veteran an email containing the information necessary to apply for the benefit. The VAU was copied on this email response that provided instructions to the veteran on how to apply for the benefit and the supporting documentation needed.
- ★ A veteran had a 9 a.m. meeting scheduled with a VSO, but upon arrival the veteran was informed that the VSO was not at work that day and no one else was available to meet with them about their claim. The veteran tried to email the VSO, but the email came back undeliverable.
 - The VAU learned that there was a typo in the email address the veteran was using; once corrected, the veteran was able to reschedule their appointment and received the services necessary.
- ★ The widow of a veteran filed a complaint against two VSO offices for mishandling her husband's

case, stating that the VSOs provided incorrect information, which caused delays in the way her husband's claim was handled. Due to incorrect information, she was denied DIC (Dependent and Indemnity Compensation) and she was still not receiving assistance necessary from IDVA to get her issue corrected. She named 3 VSOs, one has since retired. She also complained of difficulty with communicating with the other two citing the inability to get an appointment or a return phone call from either of them.

- The VAU and IDVA management reviewed all records pertaining to this case.
 - IDVA has been working with the widow to ensure all appropriate filings were made.
- ★ The daughter of a Vietnam Veteran complained via email that her father's claims had not been handled properly. She was referred to IDVA management, who told her that all paperwork was in, but the VSO failed to submit it and if she wanted to pursue the issue further, she needed to work with an attorney.
- VAU spoke with IDVA management about this situation and learned that the VSO responsible is no longer with the agency.
 - The VAU suggested that protocols be put in place to avoid situations like this going forward.
 - The VAU notified the complainant that if she wants to continue to pursue benefits for her mother in the name of her deceased father, she needs to work with an attorney.
- ★ A veteran had been trying to get an appointment for at least three weeks. The veteran's claim was started by a VSO who was retiring and told the veteran that another VSO would be their contact going forward. The veteran left a number of messages with no return call from the VSO.
- VAU provided information to the appropriate manager to contact the veteran. Eleven days after the IDVA manager was notified, the veteran called back and said they still had not heard anything.
 - VAU notified the IDVA manager, and the veteran received a call that day.
 - IDVA management worked out a plan to assist with the call backlog in that office.
 - The VAU followed up with the veteran and verified that contact had been made and the assistance necessary had been provided.
- ★ A veteran called and left 2 messages 8 days apart and hadn't heard anything back from the VSO. The veteran was trying to update their VA disability rating but had not been able to get an appointment. The veteran asked if there was another VSO that they could be referred to or if that particular VSO was the only one in that office that could help them.
- IDVA management contacted the veteran to ensure they were comfortable with that particular VSO and apologized for the delayed response.
 - VSOs were directed by IDVA management to ensure all calls are returned and "Intents to File" are completed prior to the first day of the following month to preserve effective dates.
 - The VAU followed up with the veteran to ensure contact was made and their issue was addressed.

IDVA Central Office

- ★ An employee complained about the inability to receive the same compensation for a job they were temporarily assigned (TA) to once they accepted a permanent position in that same area with a lower title.
 - The VAU learned that the employee had not been formally offered the position and thus, did not to take any action.
- ★ A veteran complained that information regarding processing veteran disability claims was not available for veterans. They also complained about the lack of funding available for training for a disabled veteran who desired to become an accredited Veteran Service Officer or Independent Agent.
 - The veteran was sent the paperwork he needed to apply for VSO accreditation, however, the veteran was not satisfied with the response from the VAU and said they would address the matter directly with the IDVA Director.
- ★ An IDVA employee was upset about the lack of support they received from leadership after their supervisor left the agency. When they told one of the leaders that they felt they were doing the job of three people the supervisor's response was that they were also doing the job of three others.
 - IDVA leadership was informed of the initial response from that leader.
 - The VAU suggested to the employee that they ask for a retiree that previously did that job to come back on a personal service contract (PSC) and assist until the vacant position was posted and filled.
 - The employee met with management, and steps were taken to get the suggested retiree back in the office on a PSC to assist.
- ★ The VAU had several conversations with staff assigned to Central Office who expressed concern with 6 of the 14 questions within the climate survey that could help identify who they were. The first two questions asked for their work location and if they were a manager or supervisor. Their main concern was with the last 4 questions in the survey which asked for race, gender, how they saw themselves (straight, gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, queer), and if they were disabled.
 - VAU spoke with IDVA leadership, which said that it did not plan to use the information to identify survey respondents, rather, they wanted to capture demographic information.
 - The VAU suggested that leadership consider working with HR on a plan to capture necessary demographic information for current employees and during the onboarding process of new employees instead of during an anonymous survey where it was possible to use that information to identify the respondents.
- ★ Several IDVA employees complained about a recent retiree who was pushing to have their personal service contract (PSC) salary set at 100% instead of the 80% norm. The complainants were also concerned about the number of PSCs that the IDVA was bringing on instead of posting the positions that PSCs were being brought in to fill. They complained of the lack of leadership in key areas, as well as how the lack of experience and understanding of IL State processes was going to be detrimental for the agency.
 - The VAU learned that the agency is working towards filling key position with qualified individuals as well as posting and permanently filling vacant positions in all areas.

★ Additional Veteran Assistance ★

In addition to fielding complaints, the VAU also receives calls regarding veterans' issues beyond those relating to the State of Illinois. For example, because the IDVA is often confused with the US Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA), the VAU receives calls and emails from veterans, their family members, and caregivers seeking assistance with services they receive from the federal VA. While the VAU does not have any authority or oversight of any USDVA programs or services, the VAU strives to ensure that every veteran within the State of Illinois receives the care, attention, and services they have earned, and thus works to assist these veterans in finding the appropriate programs or resources.

The office of the VAU is located in the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) Annex Building 1011 S. 2nd Street, Springfield, IL 62704 and is co-located with the IDVA Human Resources Department.

The VAU operates during normal business hours Monday – Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. A toll-free helpline (1-855-660-7011) and a dedicated email address, IDVA.accountability@illinois.gov, has been established for the purpose of accepting complaints, recommendations and other information concerning the IDVA.

