



VETERANS ASSISTANCE COMMISSION
of
ST. CLAIR COUNTY

John D. Lawson, Superintendent

Annual Report

Fiscal Year 2024

December 30th, 2024

The Honorable J.B. Pritzker
Governor of Illinois
State Capitol Room 207
Springfield, IL 62706-0001



Dear Governor Pritzker,

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

As the largest Veteran advocacy agency in Southern Illinois' most Veteran populous county, we provide services in the following categories:

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

In Fiscal Year 2024, the Commission was instrumental in securing an estimated \$1,028,295 in new benefits for St. Clair County Veterans, their dependents, and their survivors from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). In effect, the Commission has brought approximately 14.9% more new federal dollars into the local economy than the budgeted costs of the Commission. This figure does not include the additional money in cost savings for Veterans with access to healthcare and other benefits available through the VA.

St. Clair County continues to rank #2 in the State of Illinois for Compensation and Pension payments distributed to veterans at \$268,000,000 in 2023. We anticipate this figure to increase when the final 2024 figures are released in a few months. With the 5th highest population of veterans in Illinois (24,885), our ratio of annual dollar of compensation per veteran is \$10,766:1, ranking us #1 in counties with a veteran population of more than 300.

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

Kindest regards,

John D. Lawson
Superintendent

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Compensation: See “Disability Compensation”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Veterans Assistance Commission of St. Clair County
Delegates & Alternates
2024**

Veterans of Foreign Wars	Primary	Alternate
O’Fallon Post 805	Rodney Thompson	
Caseyville Post 1117	James Lucas	Robert Rosner
Cahokia Post 1699	Thomas Butler	
Belleville Post 1739	Charles Barbour	Andrew Dunham
E. St. Louis Post 3480	Valerie Young	Kenny Williams
Scott AFB Post 4183	Seth Miller	Don Pierre
Mascoutah Post 7682	Jill Schofield	James Latour
New Athens Post 7710	Steven Eller	
American Legion	Primary	Alternate
Belleville Post 58	William Enyart	Rodney Buhr
O’Fallon Post 137	Joyce Walton	May Brown
Mascoutah Post 292	Ronald Milton	Jason Knect
Dupo Post 485	Brian Humphrey	Fred Woods
Millstadt Post 502	John Arndt	Jon LeRuez
Freeburg Post 550	Donald “Buck” Horine	Diana Clark
Smithton Post 937	Phil Henning	
Stookey Post 1255	Samantha McCracken	Brett McCracken
Swansea Post 2007	James Page	Kori Bookman
Belleville Post 1937	Michael Kling	Gary Thomas
Disabled American Veterans	Primary	Alternate
Chapter 24	Amiee Wagoner	David Self
Veteran Golfers Association	Primary	Alternate
Arlington Greens VGA	Robert Rosner	
AMVETS	Primary	Alternate
Mascoutah Post 161	Kevin Bleisch	Ray Feltmeyer
Military Officers Association	Primary	Alternate
Southwestern Illinois Post	Robert Norman	Carroll Sunner
St. Clair County Board	Representative	Non-Voting Member
	Jerry Dinges	
United States Department of Veterans Affairs	Representative	Non-Voting Member
	Timothy Ogier	

VETERANS ASSISTANCE COMMISSION OF ST. CLAIR COUNTY ELECTED OFFICERS

President

James Page
American Legion Swansea Post 2007

1st Vice President

Ronald Milton
American Legion Mascoutah Post 292

2nd Vice President

Charles Barbour
VFW Belleville Post 1739

Treasurer

Robert Rosner
VFW Caseyville Post 1117

Secretary

Robert Brostoski
Veterans Assistance Commission of St. Clair County

1 Year Board Member

Steven Eller
VFW New Athens Post 7710

2 Year Board Member

Amiee Wagoner
DAV Chapter 24

3 Year Board Member

Jill Schofield
VFW Mascoutah Post 7682

THE MISSION OF THE VETERANS ASSISTANCE COMMISSION OF ST. CLAIR COUNTY

The purpose of this commission under existing Illinois state statutes, is to care for, relieve or maintain, wholly or in part, any eligible veteran who served in the armed forces of the United States, whose last discharge from the service was honorable, their families and families of deceased veterans.

The mission is accomplished through three strategic pillars:

1. Advocacy
2. Financial Assistance
3. Partnerships

THE STAFF OF THE VETERANS ASSISTANCE COMMISSION OF ST. CLAIR COUNTY

The Staff of the Veterans Assistance Commission of St. Clair County (hereinafter “the Commission”) is currently comprised of Superintendent John D. Lawson, Assistant Superintendent Terrence Williams, Veteran Service Officers Alan Shields, Robert Brostoski and Karen Farria.

The Commission has experienced leadership and personnel changes in 2024. John Lawson was selected as the new Superintendent. John brings over 20 years of executive experience to the Commission. He is a former Army officer, senior federal civil servant and business executive with extensive experience in strategy and operations. John is also a local legislative advocate for veterans in St. Clair County. Commission Veteran Service Officer Terrence Williams was promoted to Assistant Superintendent to assist in the operational management of the office.

Changes not only came through leadership but also in staff. Retired Army Sergeant Major, Robert Brostoski was hired as a Veteran Service Officer. Robert has been serving local veterans as the VFW District 14 Service Officer for several years and previously served as a delegate to the Commission. Karen Farria, spouse of an Air Force veteran, was also hired as an Executive Assistant / Counselor to guide veterans through financial assistance requests. Karen was recently laterally promoted to Veteran Service Officer, making her our first female VSO to better service our female veterans.

Next fiscal year, the Commission seeks to add one (1) Veteran Service Officer and one (1) Executive Secretary. Additionally, the Commission is partnering with Southwestern Illinois College to participate in the VA Work Study Program, offering student veterans a paid internship with the Commission while they attend college.



Figure 1: FY25 Organizational Chart

Since the hiring of the new Superintendent, substantial investment in technology, brand refresh and redeployment of VSOs to serve the County’s veterans “where they are” have been the focus. The Commission has migrated to a case management system that offers direct filing with the VA, more accessibility to electronic forms and claimant electronic signature. The reduction in processing time, administrative preparation and

operational portability is expected to dramatically decrease the overall processing time of each case filing.

Each VSO is now equipped with the latest technology to include a tablet computer with stylus, Wi-Fi hotspot capable cellular phone, backpack portable scanner, mobile friendly case management information system and utilization of collaborative technology unchaining our VSOs from their desks. We proudly report that our VSOs are fully remote operable in nearly any environment to better serve shut-in and immobile veterans or in emergency response situations.



Figure 2: The mobile office initiative has enhanced the operational capability of our VSOs to serve veterans anywhere, in any environment.

The Commission also upgraded video conference capabilities from an obsolete projector to a new portable video teleconference cart that can be used for not only virtual appellate court hearings but also as a more accessible option for web-based advanced VSO training.



Figure 3: Improved portable video conference capabilities are enhancing services for representing veterans in appellate hearings and providing a better web-based training environment for employees.

In addition to a mobile office, the Commission has purchased a high-capacity bulk scanner to help digitize veterans' records for preservation and ease of access. We discovered many veterans pre-2020 have only paper service and treatment records that have not been input into the various Health Information Management Systems being used by the public and private sector. This leaves the records vulnerable to fire and water damage or being lost. Lastly, the Commission has undertaken a brand and identity refresh

to help reach and appeal to younger veterans through a modern lens. The Commission intends to build upon this brand refresh in the coming years to stay relevant and responsive to the changing needs of today and yesterday's veterans.



Figure 4: Our new logo refreshes the Commission brand with a streamlined, modern visual that clearly connects veterans to the Commission.

ADVOCACY

1. Advocating for Veterans with Federal Agencies

One of the primary roles of the Commission is to advocate for Veterans in the filing of claims for compensation, pension, school tuition, and insurance to local, state and federal agencies. The Commission advocates principally with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Social Security Administration, Board of Veterans Appeals, United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims and when necessary, the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit.

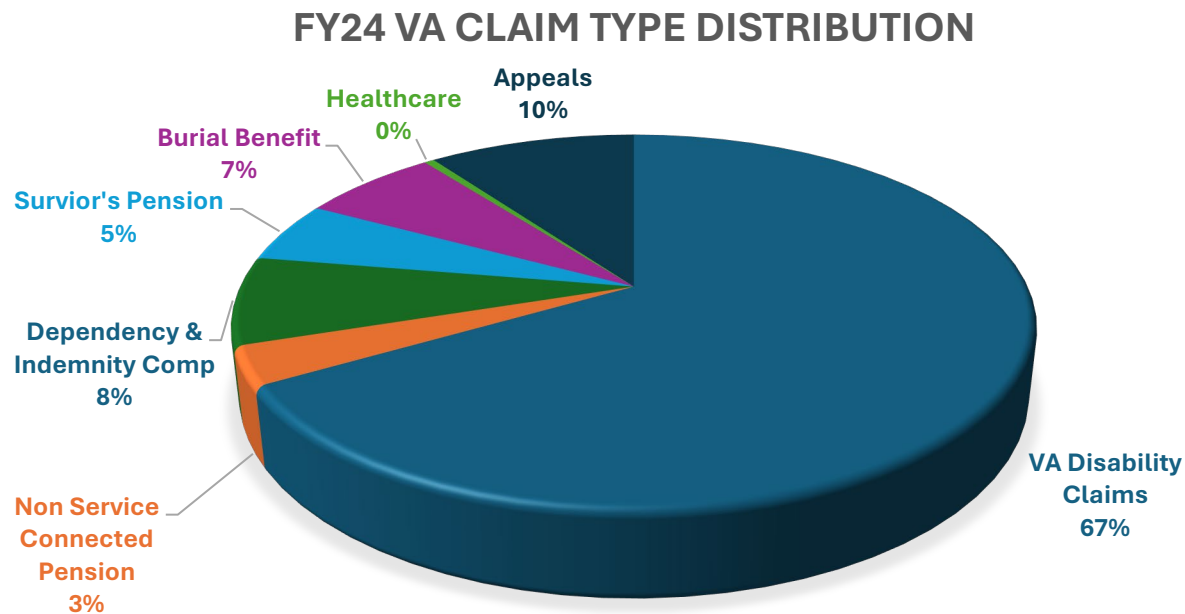


Figure 5: This chart represents the types of VA claims submitted by the Commission's VSOs in FY24.

In FY 2024, the Commission filed 208 actions with the Department of Veterans Affairs. A significant portion of those cases were VA Disability Compensation claims resulting in 47 adjudications in FY24 amounting to approximately \$1,028,295.

Unfortunately, specific details surrounding types of claims and adjudication ratings have not been analyzed in detail in past years. The Commission has initiated steps to better capture data in the future to ensure transparency and accountability to the veterans of St. Clair County.

FY24 Adjudicated Rating Results

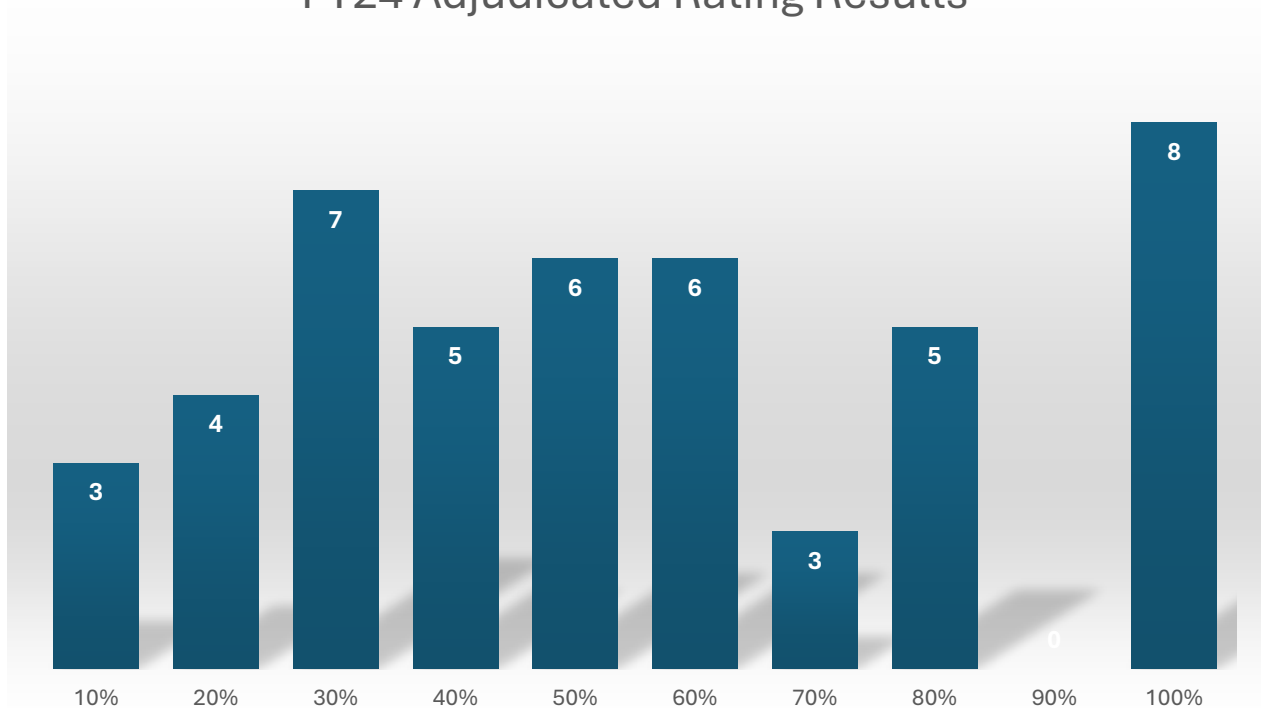


Figure 6: This graph represents the ratings obtained by the Commission's VSOs deriving from the VA Disability Claims filed in FY24.

The Commission is currently experiencing a reinvigoration and renewed relevance in the Veteran population of St. Clair County. As marketing and outreach efforts continue to increase through social media, traditional media, community events and word of mouth, requests for assistance are anticipated to continue to grow.

The VA Compensation and Pension payments to St. Clair County Veterans continues to increase substantially each year injecting federal money back into the local economy. With the passage of the PACT Act in 2022, we anticipate these figures to steadily

climb with increases in current ratings and new claims for presumptive conditions work their way through the claim system.

VA Compensation & Pension Payments (St. Clair County)

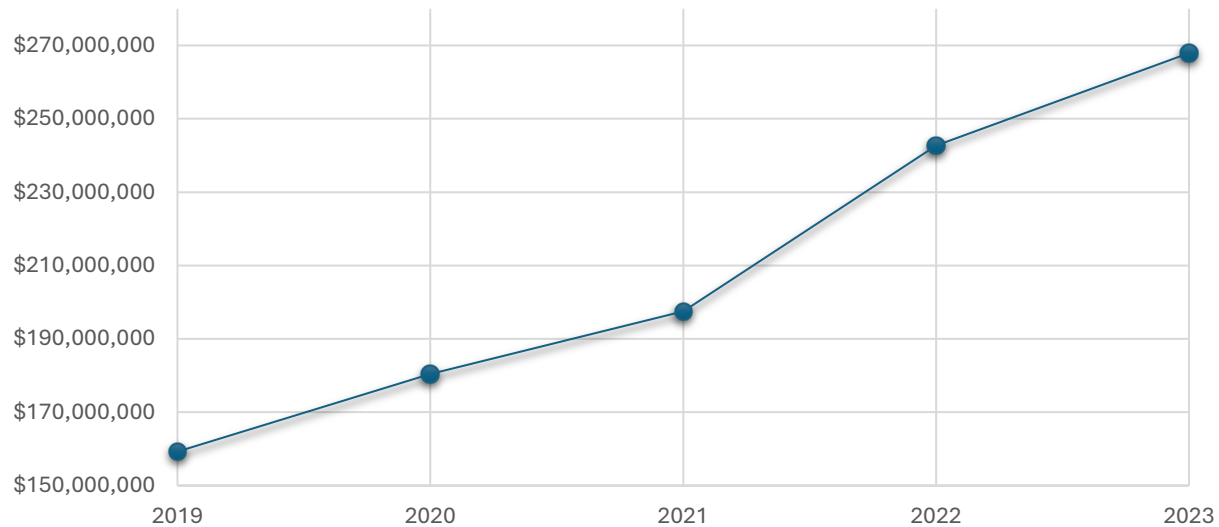


Figure 7: VA Compensation & Pension payments show steady increases, year over year since 2019.

2. Advocating for Veterans with Members of Congress

Through our affiliation with Illinois Association of Veterans Assistance Commissions (IACVAC) and our member veteran service organizations we engage Members of Congress to educate and advocate for legislation that is of benefit to our county veterans. The current major pieces of legislation we support are S. 106 Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act (CVSO), H.R. 1282 Major Richard Star Act and H.R. 8371 Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act and H.R. 1139/S. 740 Guard VA Benefits Act. In recent months the Commission has met with Senator Tammy Duckworth, Congressman Mike Bost and Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski

to express our support of these key pieces of legislation that preserve and protect hard-earned veterans' benefits.

3. Advocating for Veterans with State and Local Legislators

The Commission is grateful for the unanimous support from the General Assembly and your signing of SB 3479, amending the Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act to protect veterans from non-accredited individuals or companies that charge veterans for services that are provided for free by Veterans Assistance Commissions across the state. Illinois has become one of the leading states in protecting veterans from predatory and deceptive practices concerning the filing of VA disability claims. With this key change in the statute, it ensures that veterans are provided with a free option to file their VA disability claims by requiring oral and written disclosures that there are free resources available to assist these veterans.

In addition to SB 3479, unanimous bi-cameral legislative support and your signing into law of HB 0612. This important piece of legislation amended the property tax code to ensure that disabled veterans in Illinois are able to maintain the property tax exemptions promised to them and further expanded the exemption for World War II veterans and surviving spouses. This change will help our elderly veterans stay in their homes longer by protecting them from rapidly escalating costs associated with property value increases on a fixed income. We continue to be grateful for such unwavering support from our legislators State Representatives Charles Meier (109th), Katie Stuart (112th), Jay Hoffman (113th), Kevin Schmidt (114th) and David Friess(115th) as well as our State Senators Jason Plummer (55th), Erica Harriss (56th), Christopher Belt (57th) and Terri Bryant (58th).

The Commission is hopeful that HB 4128, Veterans Day Paid Leave Act of the 103rd General Assembly is reintroduced in the 104th General Assembly and passed without further delay. This piece of legislation was developed by St. Clair County veterans and filed through their district legislator, State Representative Kevin Schmidt (114th) and further Chief Co-Sponsored by State Representative Stephanie Kifowit (84th). It is important that veterans are afforded the paid holiday to participate in the ceremonies across Illinois that honor their service and sacrifice without the necessity of having to take a day of vacation, sick time or worse, an unpaid day off work. Veterans Day is the only Federal and State holiday in which one must EARN the honor of the subject, often at great personal sacrifice. Eight (8) hours of paid time off to participate and celebrate with their fellow Veterans is a small gesture of gratitude that produces a tangible and symbolic act of thanks.

4. Advocating for Homeless Veterans

The Commission is a key player and member of the St. Clair County Homeless Veterans Coalition. This organization is composed of representatives of the business community, federally chartered veterans service organizations, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. As a member of this Coalition, the Commission is able to synchronize resources and outreach efforts for the most vulnerable veterans of St. Clair County. The Commission is looking forward to further leveraging its financial assistance programs to better position veterans for long term success at maintaining sustainable housing. This Coalition is in its first year of formation. Strategic planning efforts are underway to combat homelessness among veterans in St. Clair County.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

The Commission provides financial Assistance, available to all honorably discharged veterans of the County, including, but not limited to rental and mortgage assistance; utility payment assistance; aid to the medically indigent; coordination with St. Clair County for payment of the county burial assistance benefit and grocery/food assistance vouchers to combat food insecurity among veterans.

This year the Commission has distributed over \$113,800 in financial assistance FY24. The subtotals of this total are \$35,992 in rental assistance, \$24,210 in utility assistance, \$49,955 in grocery/food assistance and, beginning in September 2024, mortgage assistance in the amount of \$3,664. These figures represent a 10% change increase of our 2023 data figures. These dollar figures represent 260 Orders Issued for Financial Assistance and 166 Orders Issued for Food/Grocery Assistance.

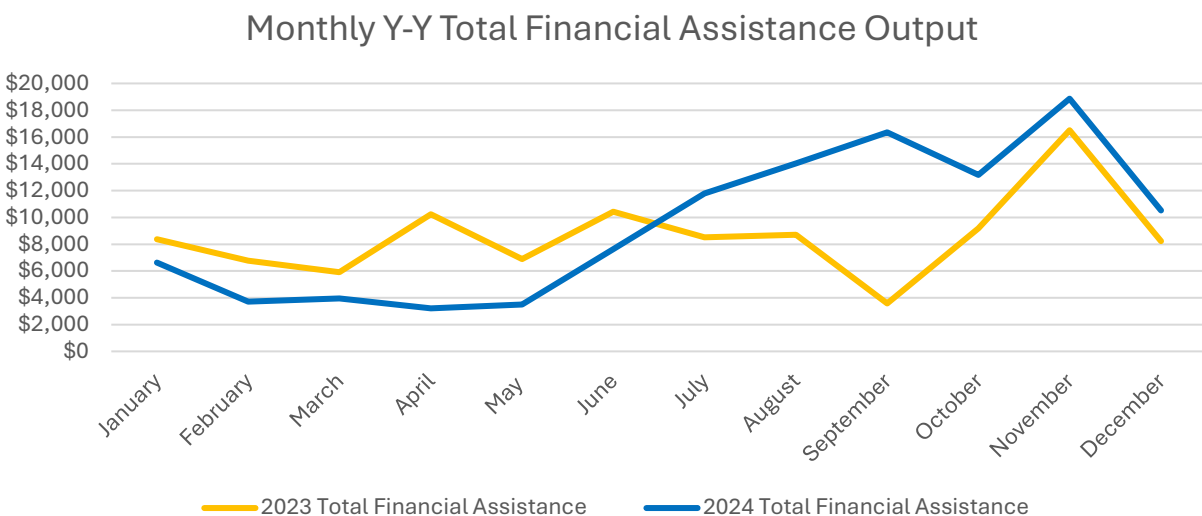


Figure 8: Year over Year by Month Comparison of Financial Assistance Output

We are seeing an increase in assistance requests due to recent enhancements in marketing and outreach of the Commission. We are reaching more veterans than ever that

need assistance. While it is disheartening to see so many veterans of the United States military in need, we are grateful for the opportunity to be able to connect these veterans to resources that can improve outcomes and be of near immediate assistance when needed.

FY24 FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE

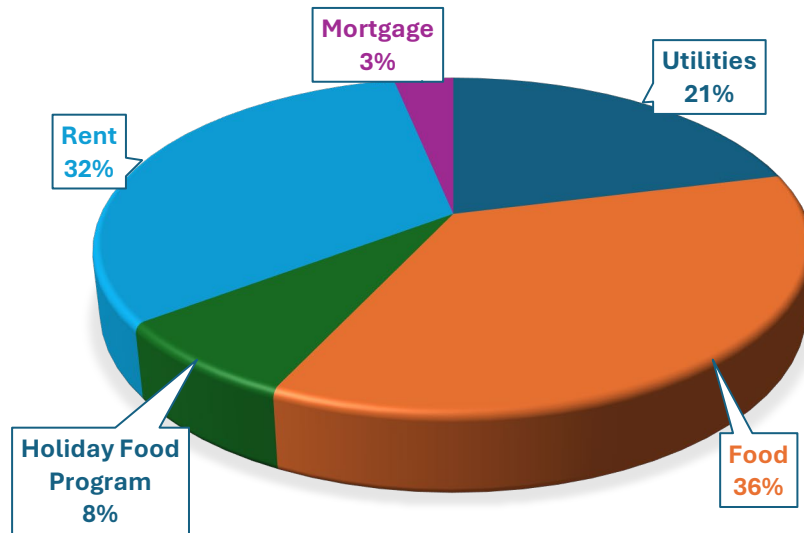


Figure 9: Food insecurity & affordable housing continue to be a challenge in St. Clair County for FY24.

The Commission will continue to abide by the rigorous standards in granting assistance requests as established by our delegates. The standards are not intended to be overly burdensome, but to ensure that temporary assistance is rendered to the appropriate qualifying persons while clear paths and connection to permanent resources are established. The delegates of the Commission conduct regular quarterly audits of our financial assistance files ensuring fidelity to standard and transparency for the taxpayer.

PARTNERSHIPS

1. Improving Outcomes for Justice-Involved Veterans

One of the Commission's most impactful partnerships is with the St. Clair County Veterans Court. Many men and women have proudly served in the United States Armed Forces and sacrificed greatly in doing so. That military service can sometimes take a serious toll on those individuals: physically, emotionally, and mentally. Veterans Court was designed as a way of recognizing that toll and offering Veterans who have committed non-violent criminal offenses the opportunity to seek services through the Veterans Administration to get back on the right track and to again become contributing members of society. Individuals who complete the Veterans Court Program will have their criminal cases dismissed at the end of the program. In FY24 the program admitted 21 participants, graduated 5 participants with 1 participant dropped from the program.

2. Improving Veterans Access to Employment

The Commission coordinated and hosted its first annual Veteran Resource Fair on May 7th, 2024. The event was a success and connected Veterans with local hiring organizations that are veteran supportive and actively hiring. In addition to employment resources, other information regarding veteran focused benefits and services were offered by a multitude of supporting agencies and organizations. The event was well attended by veterans and community business partners.

The Commission is currently in the planning stage of this now annual event and committed to hosting this event again on May 6th, 2025. The Commission thanks the City of

Belleville for their generous annual donation of facilities at the newly renovated Arena at The Campus.



Figure 10: Images from the May 7th, 2024 Veterans Resource Fair

3. Improving Veterans Connection to Government Agencies

On June 29th, 2024, the Commission hosted a town hall meeting with Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Director, Terry Prince. Veterans were provided an update on the initiatives and priorities for IDVA. Additionally, the Commission, Illinois Joining Forces, American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars hosted information tables to share a variety

of important programs and benefits with attendees. During this event, veterans were afforded the opportunity to ask questions and converse directly to Director Prince. We are grateful for the opportunity to host IDVA and anticipate this relationship to continue to expand and grow in the years to come.

VETERAN TOWN HALL EVENT
WITH ILLINOIS DEPT. OF VETERAN AFFAIRS
DIRECTOR, TERRY PRINCE

SATURDAY, 29 JUNE 9:00 AM - 11:00 AM

LOCATION: SWANSEA MOOSE LODGE
2425 N. ILLINOIS ST, SWANSEA, IL. 62226

JOIN US FOR AN INSIGHTFUL
DISCUSSION WITH IDVA DIRECTOR
TERRY PRINCE.

ENGAGE WITH KEY FIGURES
AND HAVE SOME BREAKFAST
AND COFFEE PROVIDED BY VAC
OF ST. CLAIR COUNTY!

IDVA
ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS

*Learn about veteran support
programs and services in
your community.*

*Thank You
VETERANS*

For more information please contact: VAC of St. Clair County at
(618) 277-0040

Hosted by Veterans Assistance Commission of St. Clair County



Figure 11: St. Clair County veterans were able to talk with IDVA Director Terry Prince in a town hall on June 29, 2024.

4. Community Partnerships

The Commission has continued its partnerships with both U.S. Senate and Congressional offices and State Legislators in St. Clair County to ensure the best possible legislation is produced and enacted for Illinois veterans.



Figure 12: U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth, State Representative Jay Hoffman and Commission Superintendent John Lawson celebrating Veterans Day in Belleville, Illinois

The Metro East Vet Center, part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Commission have continued their collaborative partnership in knowledge sharing and cross referral of veterans.



Figure 13: VSO Robert Brostoski attends the VetCenter Chili Cookoff & Hobby Show

The St. Clair County Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) continues to be an important lifeline of primary care for St. Clair County Veterans and the Compensation & Pension Exam process. The Commission expects to continue to build a more robust relationship in the coming program year.

The St. Clair County Homeless Veterans Coalition and the Commission have partnered to utilize the resources available to their best effective use to combat homelessness of veterans in St. Clair County.

The Commission partners with The Eagle's Nest, a homeless veterans shelter operated by The Joseph Center in East St. Louis, Illinois. The Commission provides a VSO monthly to assist with VA Disability Claim filing, records requests and transitional assistance from unhoused to housed. The Eagle's Nest reports a 95% success rate at transitioning Veterans to stable housing with their program.

The Commission has renewed its partnership and commitment to our large U.S. military contingency through the Scott AFB Military & Family Readiness Center. We hope to expand that partnership through the St. Clair County Military Liaison's Office in FY25.



Figure 14: Commission Superintendent John Lawson and VSO Alan Shields attend the 126th Air Refueling Wing Holiday Party and Welcome Home Event for 100 returning Illinois Air National Guardsmen.

The Commission looks forward to continuing its long-time affiliation with the Illinois Association of County Veterans Assistance Commissions (IACVAC). This vital organization serves as a central coordinating body for training, operational best practice sharing and general resources for Commissions across the state.

WAY FORWARD IN 2025

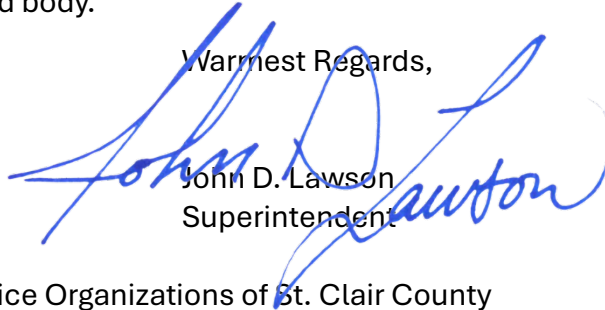
The Commission has experienced a great deal of change in the last half of 2024. The changes enacted by the veteran community and Delegates of the Commission were undertaken in good faith to enhance and expand the reach and capabilities of the Veterans Assistance Commission of St. Clair County. The operational and strategic improvements of 2024 lead us to believe our position to be one of strength and optimism.

We anticipate continuing to see substantial increases in usage of the Commission's services as information regarding the PACT Act continues to be shared and clarified in the veteran community. To accommodate the growth in need and relevancy, we are exploring additions to staff in FY25. Additional or new office space will need to be secured for the Commission to adequately serve the just and necessary needs of veterans in St. Clair County within the next fiscal year.

The Commission is fully committed to continue its upward trajectory and building a lasting, strategic partnership with the St. Clair County Government as we serve not only the military community of Scott AFB but the veteran community that it bears in return after service. The obligation to cultivate and build a military and veteran supportive community does not end when the uniform is retired to the closet.

The Commission's priorities for 2025 are to further solidify our operational rigor, drive advocacy for veterans in Southern Illinois, secure new office space and continue to seize upon opportunities to leverage technology to enhance our service delivery. We are proud to serve our community and the veterans that have maintained our nation through the sacrifice of their mind and body.

Warmest Regards,



John D. Lawson
Superintendent

CC: Member Veteran Service Organizations of St. Clair County
Federal Legislators
State Legislators
Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs
St. Clair County Board & Chairman