



The Navigator

From the desk of Department President Cindy:

Hello Members!

I hope everyone enjoyed the holidays and feels refreshed and ready to tackle the year's second half. Remember, membership doesn't end on December 31st—we should be reaching out to our members and reminding them why they joined us in the first place:

1. To honor their special Veteran.
2. To help Veterans in general.

Now is the time to encourage joining or converting to a Life Membership, especially as the cost to join will likely increase in the coming years.

If we don't continue to recruit new members to replace the ones we lose, we will cease to exist. It's vital for our organization to continue to work on membership every day. By telling people in passing at a gathering some of the great things our organization does, they may not be eligible but will pass the information on to someone who is. Even if a person isn't eligible for our great organization. I don't know of anyone who would turn down a warm body and an extra set of hands during a fundraiser. Let them help!

As I prepare this message ahead of time for publication, I am eagerly anticipating my second National Council of Administration in Cancun. We recently had a productive Zoom call with 24-25 Presidents and National President Brenda Byrant. It was wonderful to see other Department Presidents, hear about their experiences, and learn from their initiatives. Although we've faced many closures, we haven't needed any mediation or similar interventions. We have had one newly instituted Auxiliary! We welcome #342, the new members, and our beloved transferred members.

I have received documentation from several Auxiliaries with the Back Pack for Homeless Veterans. I do know one thing, when our organization is asked to do something, we do it on a grand scale. The Illinois joint project is progressing well. Don't forget about our National Project of "Operation Bottom Cover." I was glad to hear that others were jumping on the baby bottom project also. Thank you to FNB Community Bank for participating.

The February Council of Administration (CoA) and Voice of Democracy (VOD) banquet is approaching quickly. In my own Auxiliary, several members who have never attended a VOD or CoA are planning to come. I encourage all of you who have attended before to bring along a fellow member who hasn't experienced it yet. We have a Veterans Service Officer (VSO), Freddy Rocha, from Rochester lined up to speak at our CoA meeting in February. Freddy is energetic and will discuss available benefits and offer a question-and-answer period. Typically, everyone arrives on Thursday for the VOD, but not this year, due to our National President previously completing her official visit. We

are looking forward to hosting Janey Faher, National Guard as our representative for the

CoA and VOD. District Presidents will be taken out on Friday evening for dinner and a special event, so plan on arriving by 5 p.m. Friday.

I had the privilege of attending a District's VOD banquet and look forward to hearing the winning student's essays every year. It renews my faith in the future after listening to the young students. Additionally, it's always a great experience to visit the tomb with the students.

Thank you for your continued dedication and support.

Warm regards,
Cindy Watters

Treasurer's Ramblings Linda Lorenz:

District and Auxiliary Treasurers:

Make all checks payable to: "VFW Auxiliary Department of IL" and make sure that the checks are signed by the Auxiliary President and the Auxiliary Treasurer. If the check does not contain both signatures, your checks will be returned for the proper signatures.

Please do not make checks payable to me personally.

Where can you find the Circle of Excellence Report, the Audit Report and the Donations Report and Form?

Start by signing on to the Illinois VFW Auxiliary Web Site at: www.vfwauxil.org.

You will sign on under Login - Member Only. If this is your first time, you will log on using your member ID as the username and your password is your last name with only the first letter capitalized.

Once you are logged in, scroll down the page and you will see several selections available to you.

- o Select the Dept Secretary and Treasurer's Reports. You will find the links to the 2024 – 2025 Donations Form, the Donations Form and the Audit Report.

- o Select Circle of Excellence and you will see the reports by District. Each Auxiliary is listed in their individual District.

Now is the time to be sure that you are ready for the end of the year.

Are your audits up to date? Have you sent them to the Department Treasurer?

- o If you are missing audits that have been completed, please send them to me. You can mail, scan or fax them to me.

- o If they are not correct and/or current, please get them done now.

To be eligible for the Department's Circle of Excellence your audits must be correct and current by May 31, 2025. Points will not be taken into consideration if the audits are not current.

Your auxiliary will not be able to vote at the District or Department Convention. If you have delegates that will be attending the National Convention, they will not be able to register as a delegate.

- o Just a reminder that your audit for the months of January – March 2025 is due by May 31 and must also be received for your Auxiliary to be able to vote.

In April you will receive an invoice for your auxiliary Department Convention Delegate fee. The fee will be for the President and Delegates allowed for your Auxiliary. This invoice must be paid in full by May 31, 2025 whether you are planning to attend the convention or not.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please feel free to contact me.

From Secretary Rhonda Borkgren:

We are already at the beginning of February. Without forgetting the work we need to do to complete this year, it's time to think about elections. Do you have officers moving through the chairs? If not, it's time to talk about it. Our Auxiliaries get into the rut of having the same President, Secretary, and Treasurer forever. If you have had the same officers for several years, try to find someone new to take their place, while they can teach them the job. The President needs to run the meeting. It tells you everything you have to say in the Podium Book. If you are interested or would just do it to help out, now is the time to step up and say you are interested. The Treasurer's job is a little more involved, but it isn't hard. The outgoing Treasurer could help you. Or if you aren't sure you want to do it this year, but maybe next year, tell the treasurer. I would guess she would teach you how to do her job, or let you help her. Year after year, I watch or am assigned to close auxiliaries because they can't get officers. I see so many auxiliaries are just one or two members away from closing. Let's try really hard to get new members and get them involved. Getting new members that never come to a meeting doesn't help. We need new blood to keep going. Every year our membership numbers drop, and we need to reverse that trend.

This year, our Department President has said we are going to be totally green when sending out election documents. I will email the packet to the President and Secretary of each Auxiliary. I would appreciate it if each President and Secretary checks your email address on MALTA to be sure you have the correct account address listed. If you have any questions, you can contact me. You will need to print the material for your meeting.

We get the question a lot about holding multiple offices. Here is what the bylaw book says.

1. An Auxiliary must have 10 members in good standing. (Sec 207 Surrender or Forfeiture of Charter Sections A and C)
2. There are 10 elected officers and one appointed (Secretary) that are needed. (Ref: Section 801, Sec 802 and Sec 803) The trustees can be any of the elected/appointed officers except the President, Secretary and Treasurer. The appointed secretary can be any of the elected officers (the bylaws do not have a restriction on this). So the minimum number of members to hold the offices would be 7.
3. Elected officers would be Pres, Sr, Jr, Treasurer, Chaplain, Conductor and Guard. The Secretary since appointed could be any of these elected officers. The three trustees could be elected from the Sr, Jr, Chaplain, Conductor, or Guard providing that none of these are the appointed Secretary.
4. Sec 210 is not clear on the 10 business meetings per year -- I always assumed this would be the Auxiliary fiscal year (Sec 919) which is from July 1 to June 30. You may need to contact National for a Bylaws ruling on this.

I hope these things help you as you start thinking about elections in April. If you are having problems, now is the time to contact Department President Cindy. Don't wait until election and you can't get officers. We are here and ready to help you.

VETERANS & FAMILY SUPPORT

Tammy Napier, Chairman

VFW Auxiliary – Department of Illinois

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Olney, IL 62450

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The 2024-2025 “Navigating the Future” Auxiliary year is flying by! Can you believe we are over halfway through and still have so much work to do for our Veterans, soldiers, and their families? To the Auxiliaries who have reported projects and made donations, THANK YOU! Keep up the good work! Unfortunately, many more Illinois Auxiliaries need to report the work that has undoubtedly already been done. It is not too late!

Deadline Reminders

- The VFW’s Sport Clips Help A Hero Scholarship applications for the Fall 2025 semester are being accepted through April 30, 2025
- VFS Department Award for Auxiliaries #2 - An award to the Auxiliary hosting the most outstanding activity and/or event to increase awareness of suicide and mental health for Veterans, military, and their families. VFW Auxiliaries must send the required entry form to the Department Chairman by March 31, 2025. The entry form is available in MALTA Member Resources and the Department website.
- VFS Department Award for Auxiliaries #3 and Districts #1 - An award to the Auxiliary and District with the best promotion of all aspects of the Veterans and Family Support Program. Auxiliary Chairman and District Chairman VFS must submit a report to the Department VFS Chairman no later than April 15, 2025, to qualify. Monthly reports are strongly encouraged. (NOT REQUIRED – A year-end summary will also be accepted.)
- VFS Department Award for Districts #2 - An award to the District with the largest total (District and its Auxiliaries) donation to the Department President’s Special Project “This Able Vet”. Donations must be received by the Department Treasurer on or before April 15, 2025, to be included.

“From Our Branches to Our Roots: Extending Service to Our Veterans” is what the Veterans and Family Support Program is about. Let’s work together and finish the “Navigating the Future” year strong!

Auxiliary Outreach

Denita Ricci, Chairman

Greetings Illinois Auxiliary Members!

I am warmhearted to read about all the people who are consistently helping other organizations. Many organizations do not have the resources to meet their goals but when we give them our time it helps them complete their tasks sooner and prevents burnout. Volunteering also has a positive effect on us. It provides a sense of purpose and teaches valuable skills.

Even though many Auxiliaries have reported, we still have a couple of months to lend a helping hand to our community!

What is your Auxiliary Outreach New Year's Resolution?

1) Fix something 2) Clean someplace 3) Plant something 5) Feed someone 6) Man a booth 7) Set up an event Show your PRIDE and wear Auxiliary gear! Then take photos to remember your efforts and the impact of your time!

Just to Clarify: I have received some amazing reports on work that the Auxiliaries have completed but I find myself following up quite a lot with the reports. Outreach is not about donating funds, goods, or taking up collection. While these truly make an impact, Auxiliary Outreach is about working side by side with another organization. Ask yourself, are you reporting in the correct program? If your project had to do with veterans, you should probably be reporting it in Veterans and Family Support, Hospital, or Aid to Veterans. Your members should be reporting each event right after it has been completed. Coach them on how to report online, while the details are fresh in their mind. Mileage is the most neglected reported item I see. If you don't track your miles while you drive, google or MapQuest your route afterwards!

Do you like Awards? We have (3) three!

- 1) A Member who completes the most Auxiliary Outreach during the year. Include the member names when you report! It is not too late to add your members' names for this award. Just email me their name and their volunteer date or event so they stand out in this competition.
- 2) The Auxiliary with the most people at an Auxiliary Outreach event. Share upcoming events at your meeting and recruit members to join you.
- 3) Best collage of Auxiliary Outreach! Gather your photos and create an image of all your Auxiliaries' works during the year. Making a photo collage is more than compiling photos together. It is a piece of art for people to remember all that you have done for your community. Start brainstorming on this project now for the National contest.

Thank you for all you do for our community and veterans!

Best regards,
Denita Ricci
Department of Illinois Auxiliary Outreach Chairman



AMERICANISM
Karen Hirstein, Chairman



Another year how time fly's when we help veterans and their families and others from our hearts to theirs we need to continue to flay our Flag high and keep all our service personnel and their families in our prayers, if you see a veteran on the street or in a store thank them for their service as without them we would not have the freedoms we have. Thank you all for your support.

**“Buddy” Poppy & VFW National Home
Cheryl Miller, Program Chairman**

Hopefully, by the time you read this, we will be over the worst of the cold spell and dreaming of flowers, with some hearts included!

Are you getting Valentines ready to take to our veterans in hospitals and homes? Why not include our beautiful poppy flower? If you already have cards, just tape a poppy on them.



These cute little doilies would be an easy alternative. Tape a poppy or two on it and you have a quick and easy Valentine. Maybe make a larger heart template and fill it in with poppies. It could be hung at the nurse's station, or in the lounge.



Also, don't forget to get your poppies ordered for those displays you need to start working on soon. Let's fill the room at the state convention with beautiful entries and give the judges a hard time deciding on winners. Remember, Illinois really kicked it at the National Convention last year!

Thank you all for the great job you did with sending birthday cards to the National Home! They feel blessed by all the cards and gifts that have been received. There's still another celebration to come on June 28th complete with carnival rides and fireworks! Details are available on the website at www.vfwnationalhome.org.

A new initiative has been introduced at the National Home called Operation Red, White and Blue. It's designed to support the families living on campus in three phases: accomplishing specific tasks and goals, progressing to continued growth and development, and finally preparing for a successful exit from the program. Learning to manage finances, advancing a career by higher education, or learning a new trade, and becoming prepared to be a homeowner are among the things that will be focused on during this time. This program will empower families as they grow with each step. Best wishes to all veteran families embarking on this venture!

Where are those entries for awards? They sure haven't been found in my inbox! There are awards at the Auxiliary, District and National level. Find the entry forms at: <https://malta.vfwauxiliary.org/MemberResources>. There is a form for the National Home and one for "Buddy"® Poppy. For detailed information about the awards see page 39/40 of the Department program book.

Hope to see you soon and until then stay safe and warm

**EXTENSION AND REVITALIZATION
JOHN WATTERS**

Happy New Year!

I am pleased to report that we instituted Post 342 in Rockford, IL, on November 23, 2024. We warmly welcome our new members to the Illinois team. Many members from Loves Park have transferred to the new auxiliary. Congratulations to everyone for their hard work on membership. We are still working on recovering lapsed members and getting their dues in. Membership affects everything we do. As we move forward, let's not forget our tools for healthy auxiliaries. You can find these tools in Malta under Resources:

- Healthy Auxiliary Checklist
- Healthy Auxiliary Questionnaire
- Auxiliary Meeting Clinic
- Good Job Certificate
- Healthy Auxiliary Certificate
- VFW Mentoring Guide

Historian

Cathy Sullivan

Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary

Historian/Media Relations Bulletin January 2025 www.vfwauxil.org

Facebook Page: Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary

Cathy Sullivan : sully717@hotmail.com

National Theme: From Our Roots to Our Branches Extending Service to Our Veterans

Department Theme: Navigating the Future -A Compass for Leadership and Unity

Happy New Year Illinois!

Looks like President Cindy rang in the New Year in her pajamas



Here we are half way through our 2024-2025 year! Good time for some reminders:

- ✓ Have you reported that your Auxiliary has a Facebook page and/or website? This activity only needs to be reported once per Auxiliary. I will be sending National a final count at the end of the year.
- ✓ Have you reported that your Auxiliary sends out monthly or quarterly newsletters? This activity can be reported once or each time you send a newsletter out. I will be sending National a final count at the end of the year.
- ✓ Did #WheresWatters make her official visit to your District? Did you post pictures on Facebook? There is an award up for grabs; it's not too late!

- ✓ Have you reviewed the Historian & Media Relations National Awards Entry Form for “Most outstanding promotion of the VFW Auxiliary Programs to the community through social media sources” Entries are due to the Chairman (me) by 3/31/25.
- ✓ Have you been following along with #BrendaLolandFound as National President Brenda makes her way across the Departments?
- ✓ Have you accessed the National Ambassador Blogs? They can be found behind Malta under Member Resources.

Now that we’ve covered the reminders, let’s move on to “new year, try new things”. Our National Historian & Media Relations Ambassador Tela Harbold tells us *“If you’ve never created a Facebook page, used hashtags or joined Instagram or X (Twitter), there is no better time than now to move forward and challenge yourself to leave your comfort zone and utilize these social media tools”*. I am obviously on Facebook and apparently I have an Instagram (I’m assuming I did that to follow some celebrity gossip ☐) and I do not believe I have an X (twitter) account, so I am going to take Tela’s advice and going see what’s happening on the IG, Insta or the Gram as it’s also known and I will create an X account. I’ll be on the look out for Auxiliaries on those platforms and I challenge you all to do the same!

To quote Natalie Massenet, a British-American Fashion entrepreneur and former journalist.....”In order to stay relevant, you have to stay open to new trends and keep educating yourself. You have to keep evolving.”

I’m sure the next social media trend is just around the corner!

Keep up the great work Illinois!



Hospital Chairman Laura Knackstedt

Happy New Year to everyone! I hope you all had a wonderful holiday and have been working hard for our Veterans. As of this writing I do not have the updated donation list for December. We currently have only 9 Auxiliaries not reported in the Hospital Program. I know you all have been doing something for our Veterans, we just need to get it reported. Operation bottom cover has been a great success. Many Auxiliaries have partnered with local businesses in their community to make this happen. I am sure all our military moms will appreciate the program. Any little extra help they can get for them and their new bundle of joy are much appreciated. I have received updated information on the phone chargers. I have reached out to VFW National to complete the branding approval and hope to be ordering them soon. This has been a great project for our Department and our Veterans and their families. Nothing worse than being at the hospital and having a dead phone. Hopefully approval from National will come soon and we can get them into our VA facilities before Spring. The ones we previously ordered for John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks have had great reviews and are much appreciated. The 100th Fisher House will be completed shortly on the Lovell Campus. I will update everyone when the open house and ribbon cutting will be. I hope several of you can make it up for the open house. Please keep in mind that blood drives are no longer reported under the hospital program. They are now considered part of Community Outreach. Please make sure to continue to report on the blood drives in your area but report under Community Outreach.

Thank you all for your continued support of the hospital program. I enjoy receiving the reports and pictures of the projects you have been working on. I am sure that this brightens our Veterans day to see our smiling faces and know we are thinking of them.

Keep up the great work!!

MEMBERSHIP

KATHRYN ROWOLD, CHAIRMAN
MARY LEE, CO-CHAIRMAN

THE NAVIGATOR - FEBRUARY 2025

MY HEART
BELONGS TO
MEMBERSHIP!



Membership is one program that doesn't have a start and stop date. Without our members, we would not have an organization and there would be no other programs to support. We must not lose sight of the support and commitment of our members and be mindful to show our appreciation.

We need to collect dues from our annual members while encouraging them to convert to life members. An annual continuous member must have his or her 2025 dues received at VFW Auxiliary National Headquarters by June 30, 2025 to maintain his or her continuous years of membership within the organization.

Recruiting new members is vital in our efforts to replace deceased members and/or non-returning members. Be sure to have the Auxiliary Membership QR code handy when recruiting! With new members comes new ideas which we need to be open to. A reminder that recruiting a new member before May 31 between the ages of 16-25 enters the recruiter in the \$100 drawing in June—be sure to scan a copy of the application to me at vfwauxkat@gmail.com. In addition to National recruiting awards, there are also Department awards for recruiting 5, 10, 15 or 20 plus new or rejoined members by May 31, 2025.

The Department's goal is for Auxiliaries and Districts to reach 101% in paid membership by May 31. The national goal is 101%+ by June 30, 2025.

The bigger the dream, the more important the team! Together we can 'Navigate the Future' and prove that dreams do come true!

Heartfelt thanks for all you do!

SCHOLARSHIPS

Laurie Sparwasser

CONTINUING EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP

If you have not yet handed out applications to auxiliary members (who have been a member for at least one year) or a member of their immediate family who will be or is attending college and needs some help with expenses and at least age 21, please give out the applications now. An essay is required with the application and it takes time to get everything completed. The application and essay must be sent to National by February 15, 2025. We really would like someone from Illinois to win this scholarship. A copy of the application is on Malta, Member Resources and Scholarships. Please do not send these applications to me – they must go directly to National. YOUNG AMERICAN CREATIVE PATRIOTIC ART AND 3-DIMENSIONAL PATRIOTIC ART Applications and all information about this contest should be at the schools. This contest is for all students in grades 9-12. It takes a lot of time for the students to complete the artwork, so they need the information as soon as possible. The 2-D art must be on canvas or paper. Students can use watercolor, pencil, pastel, charcoal, tempera, crayon, acrylic pan, ink, oil, marker or other media. The two-dimensional art should not be framed. Canvas entries can be on a stretcher frame or canvas board. All other entries must be matted in white only. Reinforce the back with heavy paper. Students can also use mounted and floating mats. The art should be no smaller than 8" by 10" and no larger than 18" x 24", not including the mat. The 3-D art can be paper mâché, pottery, fabric, wood, metalwork, etc. The piece cannot be larger than 18" in any direction. It cannot weigh more than 5 pounds. Digital art, photography, and jewelry will not be accepted. Copies of the applications and scoring sheets are in Malta, Member Resources, then Scholarships. Entries are due to your auxiliary by March 31st.. Your first-place winner must be sent to me by April 15th. Each Auxiliary can have a 2-D and 3-D first-place winner to send to me. There is no District judging for this scholarship. All auxiliaries can send me a winner. A student can enter both the 2-D and 3-D contests.

VOD AND PATRIOTS PEN

These contests are completed, but there are several Auxiliaries not yet reported in these contests. Please send me your reports as soon as possible. I know you are doing the work, I need the report for my year-end report for our Department President. If you are not able to navigate online reporting, you can send me a paper report or call me with the information and I will report it online for you.

YOUTH ACTIVITIES Barb Sweger

Phone: (815) 481-8288

Email: deptilyouth@yahoo.com

As we move forward into the new year, let the memories and warmth of the past holiday season spark your imagination.

Don't forget about the **Illustrating America for Youth Activities Art Contest** – an exciting opportunity for young artists in our communities to showcase their creativity and passion for America! This contest is open to **elementary, middle, and junior high school students** and encourages them to express their artistic talents while reflecting on the beauty and spirit of our nation.

Key Details:

- **Grade Divisions:** K-2, 3-5, and 6-8
- **Deadlines:**
 - Due to Auxiliaries by March 31st
 - Due to Department Chairman by April 15th – you can do a District judging, but this is optional.
- **Artwork Requirements:**
 - Must be **2-dimensional** (canvas or paper).
 - Must be **created during the 2024-2025 school year**.
 - Original artwork only.



First-Place Winners from the Department level in each grade division will be sent to **National for further judging!** This is an amazing opportunity for students to gain recognition on a national level and celebrate their artistic achievements. Illinois had a First Place Winner for 2023-2024 – Watson B. You can see his winning art at www.vfwauxiliary.org/illustrating-america/.

Don't forget to check out the Youth Activities Program for your info sheets, entry forms and art release forms for the artwork you send to me.

Greetings and Happy New Year Team Illinois!

The General Election is over. I have the highest confidence that everyone voted because we all know how important it is that our veterans' voices are heard in Washington. The 119th Congress was seated on January 3rd. Our expectations are high for this newly elected Congress.

Attached is a list of important pending legislation. Please print/download and review all of its content. Choose a few VFW-supported and/or VFW-opposed bills and focus on those with your local and state legislators. See how far you can go by working together. The H.R. 8371 Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act is a good start! Be an advocate. Be informed. Be engaged.

Keep up the magnificent work brothers and sisters! Respond to every Action Alert received from Action Corp and continue to report all your activities. For those who are mailing me paper reports, please include your Auxiliary and District Nos. Thank you!

Be safe during these winter months. Check in on your senior veterans and keep our military overseas in your prayers.

Lisa Rivera, Department Legislative Chairman

Pending Legislation

Statement of

Patrick Murray, Director

National Legislative Service

Veterans of the Foreign Wars of the United States

Before The

United States House of Representatives

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Subcommittee on Health

With Respect To

Pending Legislation

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on legislation pending before this subcommittee.

A recent health survey by the VFW that was closed just last week reveals that veterans prefer utilizing Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities for their health care needs. A total of 2,500 veterans responded to this survey and they indicated overwhelming support for VA to remain the primary deliverer of care for veterans. Lawmakers must prioritize creating a robust health care framework for our veterans, ensuring VA has the necessary resources to effectively support its mission and deliver the care that all veterans deserve. Once these survey results are completed and analyzed, we will gladly share them with this subcommittee.

H.R. 214, Veterans' True Choice Act of 2023

The VFW cannot support this legislation as written to grant veterans with service-connected disabilities access to TRICARE Select. The TRICARE health care program provides care for uniformed services, active duty service members and their families, National Guard and Reserve members and their families, retirees, retiree family members, survivors, and certain former spouses around the globe. This program incurs costs for nearly all participants except for active duty service members.

We recognize the benefit additional health care coverage could provide for certain veterans, but requiring veterans to remove themselves from the VA system and remain only in TRICARE with VA covering the costs of this care could reduce resources for other VA patients. Veterans already benefit from the VA health care system, which provides low- to no-cost medical care and access to community services when requirements are met. If this legislation were to pass, service-connected veterans would face out-of-pocket expenses for their care and could not receive TRICARE and VA services concurrently. Furthermore, the proposed coverage would impose limitations on key diagnostic services, restricting visits, consultations, and procedures. Notably, family members of service-connected veterans would be excluded from TRICARE eligibility. Additionally, it seems as if this legislation is intended to offer more choice for veterans but it could also restrict that choice for many others. As currently written, this proposal could force all other veterans who have eligibility for both VA and TRICARE to choose only one health plan instead of choosing to have double coverage if they are previously eligible.

H.R. 3176, Veterans Health Care Freedom Act

The VFW opposes this bill as written as it would expand uncoordinated community care without many safeguards. This proposal would lead to increased costs at VA and could result in reduced resources for VA direct care and coordinated community care. The U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims decided in the *Wolfe v. Wilkie* case in 2019 that VA must reimburse the costs associated with uncoordinated emergency care. Since that decision, the community care spending on this uncoordinated care has grown significantly year over year. Currently, the uncoordinated care spending is approximately \$8 billion dollars, which is 25 percent of the entire VA community care costs. If a proposal like this were to be enacted, those costs would grow exponentially, likely siphoning resources from direct care and coordinated community care for veterans.

H.R. 5287, Veterans Access to Direct Primary Care Act

The VFW does not support this legislation as written establishing a pilot program for providing veterans with Health Savings Accounts (HSAs). These accounts would enable veterans to receive primary care through non-departmental direct primary care arrangements. Instead, the VFW advocates for veterans to receive their care through the VA medical system, which offers more than just health care. It also creates an environment where veterans feel comfortable and understood.

The VFW is concerned about the funding source for this pilot program, as it could divert resources from an already strained system. The legislation needs to outline its intentions clearly. The Community Care Network (CCN) was created to support the needs of veterans who have enrolled in VA health

care, ensuring they receive timely care in services VA cannot provide. Establishing HSAs could restrict veteran access to care from outside entities that may not be veteran-focused or adequately meet their needs. VA staff are trained to go beyond a textbook approach in addressing the unique issues that arise from veterans' experiences.

We would, however, support HSAs as an additional service to veterans who use VA care as a way to supplement out-of-pocket health care costs that may be incurred. HSAs are a valuable tool to help many Americans with routine expenses, and if this were added to VA care instead of being a replacement, we would likely support the proposal.

H.R. 6333, Veterans Emergency Care Reimbursement Act of 2023

The VFW supports this proposal to ensure veterans receive reimbursement.

The *Wolfe v. Wilkie* decision ensured certain veterans were reimbursed for certain emergency care, and those who fell outside of that class were possibly left behind. We support veterans being reimbursed for the care they have earned, even if it is in the community.

H.R. 8347, Improving Menopause Care for Veterans Act of 2024

The VFW supports this proposal and has advocated for legislation that would fund a study on menopause care provided by VA. As more women serve in the military, the number of female veterans eligible for health care continues to rise. Women veterans have unique health care needs that should be addressed throughout various stages of their lives, including pregnancy, perimenopause, and menopause. However, limited research on menopause and its effects on women veterans restricts the development of treatment options for patients and training for health care providers.

H.R. 8481, Emergency Community Care Notification Time Adjustment Act of 2024

The VFW does not support this legislation as written at this time, but we believe there are grounds for extending this deadline for submitting applications for emergency treatment provided in non-VA facilities. The current 72-hour notification policy allows VA to coordinate a veteran's care and potentially transfer the patient to a VA facility once the condition is stabilized and clinically appropriate. The 72-hour deadline is arbitrary and may be too short for veterans who face serious health issues or major life incidents. However, we understand there needs to be some limitation on this notification, so care does not stay uncoordinated indefinitely. We would be happy to work with the committee and Representative Mast's office to determine the appropriate amount of time needed by patients without unduly burdening VA processing.

H.R. 9924, What Works for Preventing Veteran Suicide Act

The VFW supports this legislation to establish standard practices for a grant or pilot program administered by the Secretary of VA. In August 2024, VA awarded \$52.5 million to community organizations working to prevent veteran suicide. Clear and measurable objectives would allow VA to determine whether prevention methods are adequate for the veterans in a target area. Alongside the pending legislation of H.R. 4157/ S. 928, Not Just a Number Act, multiple factors that place veterans at risk should be observed to offer complete prevention assistance to eliminate suicide.

H.R. 10012, A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to include eyeglass lens fittings in the category of medical services authorized to be furnished to veterans under the Veterans Community Care Program, and for other purposes

The VFW advocates for legislation allowing eyeglass lens fittings to be classified as medical services covered under the Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP). However, we believe this should be consistent with the existing requirements for receiving care in the community.

The VA MISSION Act of 2018 included many provisions that were anticipated to help veterans, caregivers, and survivors. It transformed the Veterans Choice Program into the Community Care Network (CCN) we see today, and expanded eligibility for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers to veterans of all eras. It provided hiring and retention incentives for the VA workforce and health care providers, and instituted a plan for the future infrastructure needs of the Department called the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission.

VA's CCN is plagued with too many problems that need thoughtful solutions. Unfortunately, it seems whenever CCN is discussed it is in polar terms of preventing wholesale privatization or opening full choice for the community. Neither is realistic nor what veterans who actually use VA are requesting. Our veterans who use VA prefer to stay in the VA system and they want more VA care closer to home and easier to access. Care in the community is necessary for some veterans but, if given the choice, our members routinely tell us they prefer VA direct care. We believe some of that sentiment is driven by negative experiences with the community care process. We must fix those issues because our veterans have earned quality care regardless of who provides it.

CCN is a "leaking ship," and shoving more people onto that ship would be detrimental to those veterans seeking care. We need to plug the holes in this problematic program before unduly adding more veterans to it. When used properly, CCN can save lives and improve the health outcomes for countless veterans, but when problems with CCN arise, it can drive people away from the care they have earned.

The VFW has consistently reinforced to VA that its greatest cost for care in the community is uncoordinated emergency room care. We have also called on VA to lean on its third-party administrators to ensure consistent delivery of community care to veterans who are eligible. Unfortunately, VA has not heeded these calls and the VFW regularly hears from veterans whose potential community care eligibility has been stifled by bureaucrats at the local level. The VFW has been unequivocal since the Phoenix crisis in 2014 that community care must be a part of VA care. It always has been. However, veterans expect consistency. When 23 Veterans Integrated Services Networks (VISNs) interpret the MISSION Act in 23 different ways, veterans are overlooked, just as the VA Inspector General pointed out earlier this year in Buffalo, New York.

The Department of Defense (DOD) has been able to make this work through its community care networks, which means that when veterans seek to navigate VA care for the first time, they rightfully expect a similar experience to navigating care in the military. Today, the military supplements a highly functional direct care system with a robust network of accessible community providers. Veterans expect VA to do the same.

What is jarring to the VFW is that DOD's networks are administered by some of the same vendors. However, VA refuses to similarly integrate these vendors to allow for seamless care for veterans. Instead, VA holds onto the archaic mindset that they must control the levers of care coordination, leaving the veteran to languish waiting for approved referrals and scheduling.

Today, nothing prevents VA from using the tools at its disposal to deliver predictable and timely care through the direct system and its community providers. The VFW thinks that it is tragic that we have to have this discussion on "completing the MISSION" when we believe that Congress intended for VA to implement this program the correct way the first time.

H.R. 10267, Complete the Mission Act of 2024

The VFW generally supports this legislation, but we have suggestions and feedback to strengthen it. Primarily, we strongly believe any bill that builds upon the MISSION Act must include a revamped AIR Commission like the original bill from 2018. The flawed rollout of the market assessments by VA, political infighting among members of Congress, and the inability to appoint commissioners to perform their jobs doomed the AIR process and ultimately led to it being dissolved. This is not helpful to veterans and the care they receive at VA. An infrastructure review and future plan must be enacted and carried through to ensure VA can execute its mission to deliver timely, comprehensive care to veterans through a modern infrastructure that seamlessly integrates direct, contract, and community care now and in the future.

Sec. 101 -The VFW supports the codification of access standards for the VA CCN. These access standards have been in place for years and, although they were arbitrarily adopted from old TRICARE access standards for retirees, the standards have not changed and have not been problematic for veterans since the enactment of the MISSION Act.

However, we do not believe telehealth should be outright excluded from consideration of a referral to the community for care. A positive byproduct of the difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic was the proliferation of telecommunications and telehealth care. These newer platforms should not replace, but instead should enhance the ability of providers to serve veterans. It may be possible for routine appointments to be performed via telecommunications, and should be done so when practical and acceptable to patients.

Sec. 102 -The VFW supports requiring VA to notify veterans promptly of eligibility for community care.

Sec. 103 - The VFW does not support this section as written. We believe the CCN is an integral part and necessary supplement, but not a replacement for

VA care. The Journal of General Internal Medicine and the Journal of the American College of Surgeons recently published articles based on a systematic review of studies about VA health care that concluded it is consistently as good as, or better than, non-VA health care. We believe a veteran's preference should be a factor when determining where to receive care, but we cannot advocate for fully directing care outside of a measurably better system based solely on a veteran's preference. We look forward to working with the committee to develop a thoughtful way to include preference for care without superseding all the other portions of the access standards.

Sec. 104 - The VFW supports providing veterans with prompt notice of denial for CCN referrals.

Sec. 105 - The VFW believes that telehealth is a critical tool for VA to deliver care. However, telehealth appointments should not be scheduled for veterans if that is not their request or preference. Telehealth should be an option if appropriate to the wants and needs of the patient. We look forward to working with the committee to ensure the best outcomes are available for veterans.

Sec. 106 - Adopting a value-based health care model allows for a patientcentered system that aligns with VA's whole health care approach. Valuebased care programs focus on prevention efforts to reduce illnesses and suicide, which is a top priority of VA. The VFW also supports the continuation of the Electronic Health Record Modernization as it is needed to work in conjunction with the value-based program.

Sec. 107 - The VFW supports extending the deadline for prompt payments.

Sec. 201 - The VFW generally supports the idea of this provision but would recommend instructing VA, to the extent possible, to purchase an existing platform instead of building its own. The existing language in this proposal directs VA to develop and implement a plan to establish an online interactive

self-service module. We recommend directing VA to contract with an existing provider if possible. VA is historically inept at developing its own IT platforms and a self-service module would be a great improvement for VA care, as long as it is done properly.

Sec. 202 -The VFW supports the publication of wait times at VA facilities and would like to see wait times for CCN providers added to this proposal as well. We believe veterans should be provided full transparency for care appointments to be informed about all possible availability through VA both in its own facilities and with its community partners.

Sec. 203 - The VFW has no position on this section at this time.

Sec. 204 - The VFW supports this section for increased reporting.

Sec. 205 - The VFW is pleased to see language that would improve the policies and processes that govern access to VA's mental health residential rehabilitation treatment program

(MH RRTP) as we recognize it needs serious attention. However, we would ask the standards for accessing these programs be thoughtfully considered due to the different nature of these programs. Priority admission standards should be developed differently than routine admission standards because many of these programs, whether VA-provided or in the CCN, are not local to veterans.

MH RRTP locations are often secluded and situated in rural areas as part of the provided treatments. The fact that they are often intentionally situated away from population centers means many veterans would automatically be eligible for referral to community-based services regardless of where they live. We believe a carefully considered combination of wait times and geographic boundaries must be considered for routine admissions, rather than arbitrary calculations based on entirely different treatment programs such as standard VA mental health care.

Veterans in crisis must receive timely, quality, and consistent care that aligns with their needs while also accounting for their individual preferences where feasible. We feel the proposed 48-hour deadline for residential treatment screening and admissions decisions has the potential to save lives and mitigate instances of veterans losing trust in VA's ability to provide or facilitate care when they need it most. As we collectively look to improve help-seeking behaviors among veterans, Congress and VA must ensure resources like these are equipped to meet veterans where they are without bureaucratic hurdles or inefficiencies undermining such efforts.

To that end, we would like this committee to consider including a provision that removes barriers to accessing the breadth of community-based residential treatment programs that are available and commonly tailored to veterans. One VFW member recently sought but ultimately gave up on receiving residential mental health care through VA because the program the provider determined would best meet the care needs was in the wrong network. Other available programs that met treatment needs and preferences like gender-specific programming were similarly out of network.

With rare exceptions, veterans referred to residential treatment via CCN are able to access only programs that are physically located within their respective jurisdictions, each of which is managed by either Optum Serve or TriWest Healthcare Alliance. While this structure works relatively well for common needs like orthopedics and diabetes care, the same cannot be said

for mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) programs that are limited in number, highly specialized, and variable in terms of medical expertise and treatment methods. Arbitrarily restricting program access based on administrator network boundaries limits VA's ability to coordinate timely and appropriate residential mental health and SUD care for veterans. While this is not in statute, it is in practice at VA and needs to be rectified.

Draft Bill, Supporting Medical Students and VA Workforce Act

The VFW supports the intent of this legislation to establish a joint scholarship program. Under this program, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs would fund the medical education of an officer from the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) at the Uniformed Services University. In return, the officer must serve a designated period at a VA medical facility.

This scholarship program represents an excellent collaboration between DOD and VA. It ensures that veterans receive care from dedicated professionals who prioritize the needs of our nation's heroes. Additionally, it provides USPHS officers with the opportunity to make a meaningful impact on an underserved community with unique health care needs. VA faces difficulties in hiring medical providers. This program seems like a sound investment of the finite resources VA has to obtain providers for a fraction of the cost to bring other medical professionals into the VA system.

Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, this concludes my testimony. I welcome any questions from you or members of the subcommittee.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2024, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.



The Department of Illinois
Veterans of Foreign Wars and Auxiliary



P R E S E N T T H E

2024-2025 DEPARTMENT JOINT PROJECT



BACKPACKS *for* HOMELESS VETERANS



TWO WAYS TO PARTICIPATE

ALL VFW Posts and Auxiliaries are encouraged to participate
in one of the following ways:

CREATE A BACKPACK

Some Suggested items:
Backpack, Personal care items,
Underwear, Socks, T-shirts,
Non-perishable food (w/ pull-tab lids)

**FULL BACKPACKS WILL BE
COLLECTED AT THE FEBRUARY
COUNCIL OF ADMINISTRATION
MEETING IN SPRINGFIELD**

MAKE A DONATION

Earmark donations:
"Backpacks for the Homeless"

AUXILIARY MEMBERS send to:
Department Treasurer
Linda Lorenz

VFW MEMBERS pay online at:
vfwil.org or send check to
Department Headquarters