



CHICAGOSALUTES

THIRD QUARTER: 2024

MAYOR'S OFFICE OF VETERANS AFFAIRS QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

Highlighting our Military and Veteran Community



Photo: Nov. 1987, Mayor's Advisory Committee on Veterans Affairs. From left to right: The Mayor is shown with, Andrew Moseley, Jimmy Ross, Charles Lee, Victor Perez, Yolanda Garcia, Lorenzo Ruiz, Col. Kenneth Plummer, Col. Faite Mack, Rochelle Crump, Robert Garner, Ruben McGaughy, Dr. Ronald Sable, Dr. David Curry, Lauretta Romanoski, Albert D Chesser, Col. Frank Marchant, Simeon Fleming, Barry Romo, Arthur Morimitsu, and **William 'Bill' Burke, First Director/Veterans Liaison.**

MAYOR HAROLD WASHINGTON'S CONTINUED LEGACY: ESTABLISHING THE MAYOR'S OFFICE OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

The Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs was established during the administration of Mayor Harold Washington. A veteran himself, Mayor Washington was drafted into the U.S. military during World War II and served overseas in the 1887th Engineer Aviation Battalion, an all-Black segregated unit of the United States Army Air Corps, where he rose to the rank of first sergeant.

As Chicago welcomed home many Vietnam veterans, they often faced significant challenges, including limited access to benefits and employment opportunities. Recognizing the need for dedicated support, Mayor Washington founded the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs. He appointed William "Bill" Burke, a Vietnam veteran, as the office's first director to lead this effort in the nation's third-largest city.

Since its inception, the office has been guided by a series of notable directors, including former Alderman Jim Balcer, Rochelle Crump (the first woman to hold the position), William Schmutz, Victor LaGroon, and Kevin Barszcz, the first Latino to lead the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs.



James "Jim" Balcer



Rochelle Crump



William Schmutz



Victor LaGroon



Kevin Barszcz



CELEBRATING 105 YEARS OF SERVICE

GEORGE L. GILES POST 87, THE FIRST AND OLDEST AFRICAN AMERICAN POST IN THE NATION

The American Legion George L. Giles Post #87, established in 1919, is recognized as the first and oldest African American post in the United States. Named in honor of Lieutenant George L. Giles, who was killed in action during World War I, the post was founded by his close friend, Earl B. Dickerson. A prominent civil rights leader and tireless advocate for veterans, Dickerson's impact extended far beyond the post. He served as a Chicago City Council member, Illinois Assistant Attorney General, and a champion of equal rights.

For nearly 90 years, the post has been a cornerstone of the Washington Park community, attracting notable members, including former Chicago Mayor Harold Washington. It has remained a vital institution, providing a space of belonging and recognition for African American veterans.

As a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army's 92nd Division, Dickerson served in the trenches of France during World War I. He also participated in the 1919 Paris and St. Louis Caucuses, where he played a pivotal role in the creation of The American Legion.

In celebration of its 105th anniversary, Mayor Brandon Johnson signed a proclamation honoring the post's enduring contributions to service, civil rights, and the veteran community. Along with the proclamation, the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, in partnership with the Veterans Benefits Administration Chicago Regional Office, hosted a prosperity event. This event provided essential resources to the post's members and local veterans, helping them access federal, state, and local benefits.

During the event, many veterans—some from the Vietnam era—applied for benefits for the first time. This effort underscored the critical role of outreach in bringing resources directly to the communities where veterans live, ensuring they receive the recognition and support they have earned.



TWO MEXICAN-AMERICAN VIETNAM WAR VETERANS HONORED FOR BUILDING THE ICONIC “LITTLE VILLAGE ARCHES”

The City of Chicago recently celebrated the unveiling and ribbon cutting of the newly restored Little Village Arch, a symbol of pride for the Mexican and Mexican-American community. The event brought together community members and veterans, with special recognition given to Vietnam veterans Ronald Baltierra and David Ramirez, who originally constructed the arch in 1990.

Ronald Baltierra volunteered for the draft during the Vietnam War, serving honorably as a Pointman and field-trained sniper. Following his military service, Baltierra launched a successful construction business, partnering with Ramirez for over 28 years.

David M. Ramirez, born in Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood to Mexican parents from Michoacán, served as a Combat Engineer in the U.S. Army from 1967 to 1969, overseeing security measures in Vietnam. At the unveiling ceremony, Mayor Brandon Johnson honored Baltierra and Ramirez with a proclamation in recognition of their contributions. The arch became a city landmark in 2022, the first such designation for a structure designed by a Mexican architect.

Also attending were members of the Mexican American Veterans Association (MAVA) and the Manuel Perez Jr. American Legion Post, an organization originally founded to support Mexican American veterans. The post is named in honor of Private First-Class Manuel Pérez Jr., the seventh Mexican American to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroic actions during World War II’s Battle of Luzon.





PARTNERING WITH FAITH LEADERS TO SERVE VETERANS ON THE WEST SIDE

Veterans represent every community, background, ethnicity, and faith. Community centers, places of worship, and veteran posts play a crucial role in connecting veterans to vital services within their neighborhoods.

Recognizing the important role faith leaders have in identifying and supporting veterans, the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs has partnered with these leaders to ensure that veterans receive the benefits they've earned. Through their close connections, faith leaders can help reach veterans in the places where they live and gather, especially those who may not be aware of available services.

In collaboration with the Arthur Lockhart Foundation, established by Dr. Arthur Lockhart, the former pastor of Healing Temple Church of God in Christ on Chicago's West Side, the Mayor's Office hosted a veterans-focused event. Promoted through the church's network, the event brought together over 60 veterans. The Intergovernmental Taskforce on Veterans Affairs was present to assist, helping veterans access essential benefits, including healthcare, mental health services, education, and disability compensation.

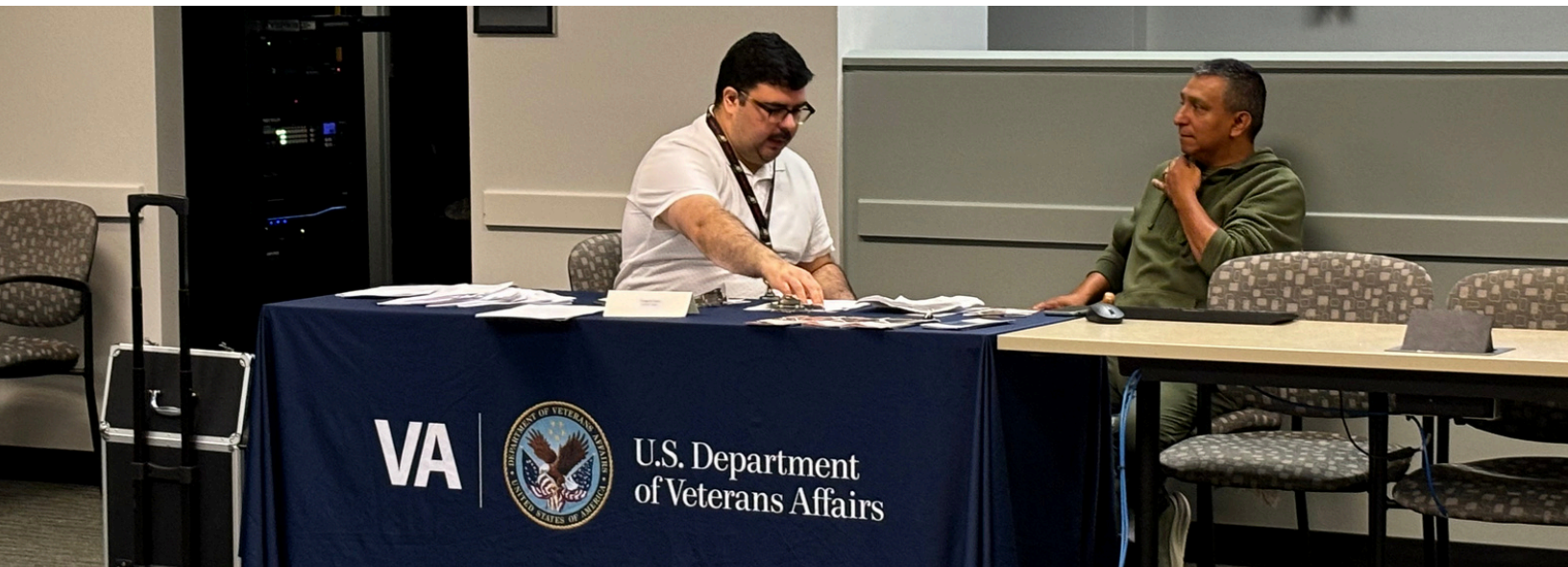




UKRAINIAN-AMERICAN VETERANS PROUDLY RAISE THE UKRAINIAN FLAG IN CHICAGO

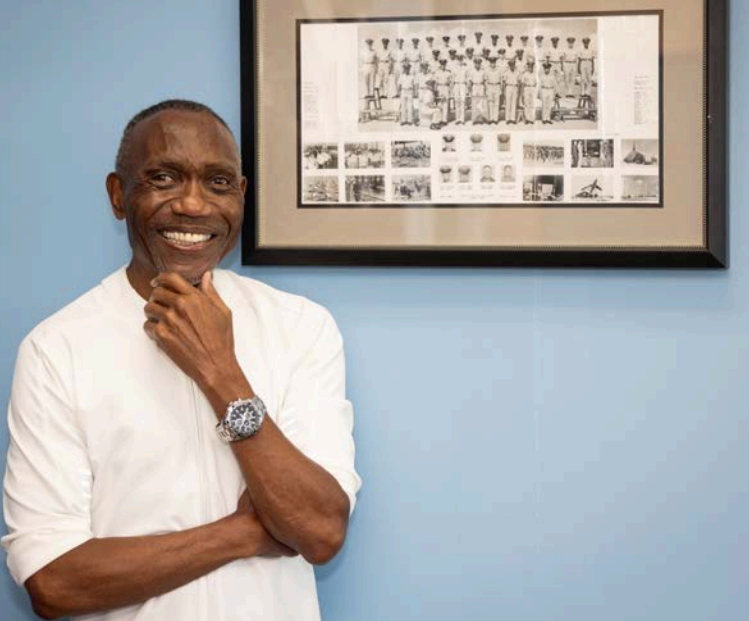
Ukrainian-American veterans, many from Post 32 in Chicago, proudly raised the blue-and-yellow Ukrainian flag at Daley Plaza in celebration of a proclamation by Mayor Brandon Johnson, officially designating August as Ukrainian-American Month in Chicago. The proclamation was read by Deputy Mayor of Immigrant, Migrant, and Refugee Rights, Beatriz Ponce de León. The event saw participation from city officials, clergy, Ukraine's Consul General in Chicago, Serhiy Koledov, and a large gathering of local residents who joined in the celebration.

Since 1991, Chicago and Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, have been official sister cities, with the Ukrainian-American community making substantial contributions to the cultural, economic, and social life of Chicago.



WELCOMING VETERANS TO CITY HALL

The Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, in collaboration with our taskforce, welcomed veterans to City Hall to share updates on our ongoing efforts and assist them in accessing the benefits they've earned. Staff members from Chicago's Regional Office was available to assist with the application process.



Ronald E. Damper

HIGHLIGHTING VETERAN-OWNED BUSINESSES: U.S. AIR FORCE VETERAN LEADS WEST SIDE MANUFACTURING TEA COMPANY

For more than 35 years, Damron Corporation, founded by U.S. Air Force Veteran Ronald Damper and located on Chicago's West Side, has been manufacturing and distributing tea products worldwide.

Damper made history as the first African American-owned company to become a national supplier for McDonald's. His company pioneered both hot and cold tea blends for McDonald's, establishing itself as their first National Diversity Supplier, a partnership that continues today with Damron still packaging McDonald's tea.

Additionally, Damron Corporation was the original manufacturer of the iconic McFlurry spoon and was named the "Diverse Supplier of the Year" by The Coca-Cola Company.

Reflecting on the company's early days, Damper noted, "I knew jobs were needed on the West Side. There was an opportunity to get involved, where jobs were appreciated and needed."





VALOR GAMES MIDWEST AND RESOURCE FAIR

The Chicago Park District recently hosted the 12th Annual Valor Games Midwest at Soldier Field. This three-day event is an introductory-level Paralympic sports competition designed for veterans and active-duty military personnel with physical, visual, and invisible disabilities. Athletes participated in various sports and activities, including discus, shot put, cycling, archery, powerlifting, indoor rowing, biathlon, and table tennis.

As part of the Valor Games Midwest, a Resource Fair was held to connect veterans, active-duty service members, and military families with agencies and organizations that offer military-specific assistance. The fair provided resources in areas such as education, employment, housing, legal support, disabilities, mental health, and family services.





NAVY WEEK IN CHICAGO & THE AIR AND WATER SHOW

The Navy Week program made its fifth return to Chicago since its launch in 2005, serving as a key outreach initiative aimed at fostering positive relationships, informing the public about the Navy's global operations, and supporting local community projects. This year, Navy Week featured over 75 events across the city, collaborating with various corporate, civic, government, educational, media, veteran, and diversity organizations.

The kickoff event was held at Daley Plaza, where Alderman William Conway presented an official resolution. The week included a variety of activities, such as Navy Days at Navy Pier, events at the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry, and participation in the Bud Billiken Parade. Sailors engaged in numerous community events, connecting with schools, veterans, and diverse neighborhoods to enhance community ties.

Navy Week concluded with the Air and Water Show along Chicago's Lakefront, a free two day event and the largest in the United States. At the Air and Water Show, resources were available for community members, including the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, which is part of Chicago's Intergovernmental Taskforce on Veterans Affairs.

The Air and Water Show also featured the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), providing wounded warriors and their families a special day that included lunch and access to a private viewing area. The WWP has been actively involved in the Chicago Air and Water Show, hosting wellness events specifically designed for injured veterans and their families.





CHICAGO STANDDOWN IN WASHINGTON PARK

The Chicago Standdown hosted its summer event at Washington Park’s General Richard L. Jones Armory, providing critical outreach to homeless veterans. Standdowns offer an opportunity to connect veterans in need with a variety of services tailored specifically for them. Over 40 agencies participated, helping veterans access benefits at the federal, state, county, and local levels. The Chicago Regional Office alone had more than 15 staff members on-site, filing claims directly for veterans. In addition to services, veterans were welcomed to a BBQ, clothing, toiletries, and other essential supplies.



CONNECTING WITH VETERANS AT FIESTA DEL SOL IN PILSEN

Our Intergovernmental Taskforce on Veterans Affairs is dedicated to a community-centered approach, ensuring veterans can access the benefits and services they need directly within their neighborhoods. Our team had a strong presence at Fiesta Del Sol in Pilsen, a four-day, free, family-friendly summer festival that is the largest Latino event of its kind in the nation, drawing over 1.2 million attendees. Services and benefits were offered in multiple languages, including healthcare, counseling and mental health support, women’s services, LGBTQ+ resources, disability compensation, and much more.



VETERAN OWNED BUSINESS WORKSHOP IN AUBURN GRESHAM

The Chicago VetCenter, the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, Chicago's Office of Contracting Equity, and the Veterans Business Project—an official City of Chicago Assist Agency dedicated to helping veterans purchase and expand businesses—hosted a workshop for veteran-owned businesses and those interested in starting a business in the city.

During the event, veterans had the chance to ask questions, connect with City staff, and network with peers. City staff members explained the process for becoming certified as a veteran-owned business, while the Veterans Business Project provided insights into acquiring existing businesses. Veteran business owners shared best practices, growth strategies, and marketing techniques to support the growth of their companies.



TASTE OF CHICAGO DOWNTOWN

The Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, alongside the Intergovernmental Taskforce on VA, has maintained a presence at all major city-sponsored events, including the Air and Water Show and Taste of Chicago, which attract nearly a million attendees. Our goal is also to engage with veterans and their families in places they may not expect, reaffirming our commitment to bringing vital resources directly to our communities.

