

VETERANS ASSISTANCE
COMMISSION OF
WINNEBAGO COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Jesus M. Pereira, Superintendent



ANNUAL REPORT

Fiscal Year 2024

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December 26, 2024

Honorable Governor J. B. Pritzker
207 State House
Springfield, Illinois 62706

Dear Governor Pritzker,

It is with great pleasure that I present you with the annual report of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Winnebago County (VACWC), Illinois.

The VACWC offers essential support and services to military veterans who have served in the United States Armed Forces, ensuring assistance for those with an Honorable or General Under Honorable Conditions discharge. Moreover, the Commission extends just and necessary aid to the families of veterans and deceased veterans with service, recognizing their need for such support and services.

Winnebago County ranked 8th in Veteran population and 96th out of 102 counties in the State of Illinois in disability compensation utilization. During fiscal year of 2024, the VACWC documented 5,507 engagements with veterans in the county and disbursed \$495,951 in General and Emergency Assistance. We completed 737 forms for VA compensation and benefits and accounted for over a \$1,000,000 in reoccurring compensation payments to Veterans and families in Winnebago County.

This past year we achieved a major milestone by offering employees health, life, and dental insurance for the first time, as mandated by the Military Veterans Assistance Act (MVAA). However, this progress faced resistance from the County Finance Department, Finance Committee, and County Board due to its impact on the FY 2025 budget. Increased costs for the VACWC's employers portion of health benefits, rising salaries, and a forecasted \$500,000 in public aid pushed the budget to \$1,639,803.01. Following a \$500,000 budget cut by the County Board, the VACWC began pursuing measures to clarify and enforce funding obligations outlined in the MVAA.

Counties and Veterans Assistance Commissions (VACs) across Illinois often interpret the funding provisions of the MVAA differently, leading to ongoing issues such as underfunding,

underrepresentation, understaffing, and mismanagement—challenges our VAC in Winnebago County also faces.

*Initially the VAC makes a recommendation of an amount that it believes to be appropriate under the law. The county board then acts upon that recommendation, **either to approve or disapprove the recommendation.***

*(Gustafson, [319 Ill. App. 255](#), [49 N.E.2d 311](#).) If the board approves the VAC's recommendation, the matter is resolved. If the board disapproves the recommendation, the VAC then has two options: it may submit a new recommendation for a different amount or the superintendent may seek judicial relief for mandamus. After listening to the views of the parties, the circuit court may issue a writ of mandamus for either the amount sought by the VAC or a different amount. *People ex rel. City of Chicago v. Board of Review* (1927), [326 Ill. 124](#), [141](#), [157 N.E. 186](#)*

[Veterans Assistance Comm'n v. County Bd.](#), [274 Ill. App. 3d 32](#), [35 \(Ill. App. Ct. 1995\)](#)

(bold-faced emphasis added)

“The term "approve" is not the same as the words "formulate," "enact" or "authorize." To "approve" is to "confirm, ratify, sanction, or consent to some act or thing done by another." (Black's Law Dictionary 94 (5th ed. 1979))”

[Veterans Assistance Comm'n v. County Bd.](#), [274 Ill. App. 3d 32](#), [35 \(Ill. App. Ct. 1995\)](#)

In the absence of clear rulings, we have relied on informal opinions from the Attorney General while awaiting decisions on writs of mandamus. Meanwhile, county representatives frequently make statements like “we gave,” “we are giving,” or “we are not,” when discussing VAC budgets, reflecting the ongoing confusion and discord.

LOCAL

Rockford area veterans could take Winnebago County to court over budget dispute



Jeff Kolkey

Rockford Register Star

Published 4:09 a.m. CT Sept. 20, 2024 | Updated 4:09 a.m. CT Sept. 20, 2024



The Veterans Assistance Commission of Winnebago County has authorized its superintendent to take legal action if the Winnebago County Board doesn't acquiesce to its budget demands.

Figure 1 Rockford Register Star Article Commission authorizes legal action

As I reflect on my first year with the Veterans Assistance Commission of Winnebago County, I am compelled to consider a profound question shaped by our county's practices and future outlook: Are the veterans of Winnebago County indebted to the taxpayers, or is it the taxpayers who owe a debt of gratitude to the veterans who have selflessly served our community and nation?

By [Anthony Ferretti](#)

Published: Aug. 28, 2024 at 10:48 PM CDT



ROCKFORD, Ill. (WIFR) - The Veterans Assistance Commission (V.A.C.) of Winnebago County claims the county board cut its budget by \$500,000, but the board says that assessment is inaccurate.

Jesus Pereira proposed a roughly \$1.6 million budget for the V.A.C. in Fiscal Year 2025. The board says the organization will receive \$1.12 million, \$500,000 less than the initial proposal.

"I want to be clear; the Winnebago County Board is not cutting their budget," says McDonald.

Keith McDonald is not only a Winnebago County Board member – he's also a veteran. He says he would love to accept the organization's proposal, but those tax dollars have already been accounted for and it's not that easy to move \$500,000 around.

Figure 2 WIFR Article "I want to be clear; the Winnebago County Board is not cutting their budget," says McDonald. ... "but those tax dollars have been accounted for"

We extend our heartfelt gratitude for your steadfast support of our county's veterans. Your commitment is truly valued. Should you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Very Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jesus Pereira". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jesus M Pereira
Operation Iraqi Freedom Veteran
Sergeant First Class, U.S. Army
Retired
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.

Functional Zero: A goal that is reached when the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness within a community is less than the average number of Veterans being connected with permanent housing each month.

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-Service-Connected Pension: See “Pension”

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 Delegates and Alternates 2024

Title	Name	Post/Ship/
President	Terrell Lewis	Am Vets Rock River Valley Chapter #922
Administrative Coordinator	Nancy Clark	Veterans of Foreign Wars – VFW Ross/Pearson Post #5149
Finance Coordinator	Eric Willard	Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter #984
Services Coordinator	Lana McCants	Veterans of Foreign Wars – Thomas Lawler Post #342
Delegate	Ken VanLandeghem	American Legion Holtz – Hirst Post #288
Alternate	Raymond Dhom	American Legion Holtz – Hirst Post #288
Delegate	Gary D. Holmes	American Legion Walter Graham Post # 332
Alternate	Amy Mullins	American Legion Walter Graham Post # 332
Delegate	George Blake	American Legion Jefferson/Horton Post #340
Alternate	Willie Evans	American Legion Jefferson/Horton Post #340
Delegate	A.C. Davis	American Legion Robert Carlson Post #1207
Alternate	George Meissen	American Legion Robert Carlson Post #1207
Delegate	Todd Burton	Disabled American Veterans Blackhawk Life Chapter #29
Alternate	John Kline	Disabled American Veterans Blackhawk Life Chapter #29
Delegate	Donald Reynolds	Marine Corps League Post #83
Alternate	Al Laskie	Marine Corps League Post #83
Delegate	Stephanie Gilberto	Navy Club Ship #1
Alternate	Debra Nelson	Navy Club Ship #1
Alternate	Jerome Egilske	Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter #984
Alternate	Jeff Greer	Veterans of Foreign Wars – Thomas Lawler Post #342
Delegate	Rueben Hernandez	Veterans of Foreign Wars – VFW Roscoe Post #2955
Alternate	David Draeger	Veterans of Foreign Wars – VFW Roscoe Post #2955
Alternate	Fernando Delgado	Veterans of Foreign Wars – VFW Ross/Pearson Post #5149
Delegate	Gene Schaefer	Veterans of Foreign Wars – VFW Loves Park Post #9759
Alternate	John Hood	Veterans of Foreign Wars – VFW Loves Park Post #9759

Table 1 Delegates and Alternates

Successes

We begin by accounting for over \$1,000,000 in reoccurring VA disability compensation payments in which we aided veterans and eligible dependents apply for and receive in fiscal year 2024. The local impact in VA health care utilization is not computed in this report but we intend on determining this impact in the fiscal year 2025 report.

Office hours were extended from 9:00 A.M. – 3:00 P.M. to 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. The vacwc.org website went live and ease of use and functionality are notable. Our brand-new Chrysler Pacifica's received their new livery and makes a statement going down the road.

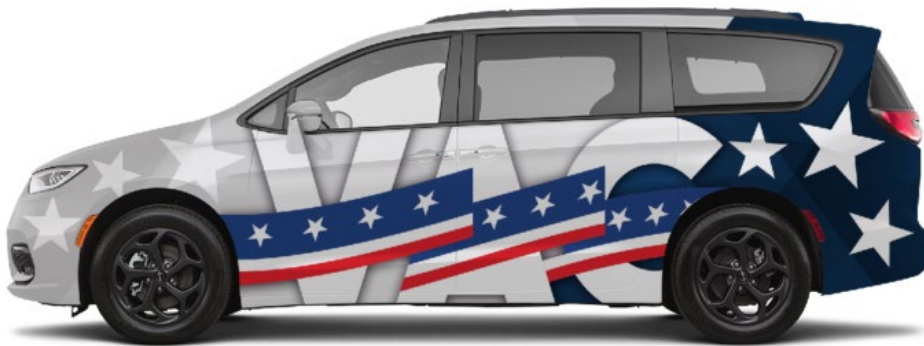


Figure 3 VACWC Local Transportation Vehicle

The VACWC's finances now benefit from enhanced transparency by utilizing the county finance team, ensuring greater accountability. Transactions can be monitored through the [Online Checkbook](#), providing taxpayers with a clear view of how funds are utilized. Additionally, vehicles are now equipped with fleet cards for fuel purchases, offering improved control and safeguarding funds by restricting usage to authorized vehicle operators.

In January of 2024 the employees of the VACWC enjoyed access to the same benefits as county employees previously unavailable, including life, health, and dental insurance. Furthermore, with the Munis add-on provided by the county, employees can conveniently track their leave and view paychecks online.

We take pride in offering competitive wages that align with industry standards and reflect our commitment to attracting and retaining top talent. By ensuring our compensation is both fair and in line with others in our professional field, we demonstrate the value we place on the skills, dedication, and expertise our team members bring to the organization. This approach not only supports employee satisfaction and retention but also fosters a workplace environment where individuals are motivated to excel and contribute to our overall success.

Highest salary at Veterans Assistance Commission of Winnebago County in year 2023 was \$43,560. Number of employees at Veterans Assistance Commission of Winnebago County in year 2023 was 9. Average annual salary was \$23,787 and median salary was \$20,736. Veterans Assistance Commission of Winnebago County average salary is 49 percent lower than USA average and median salary is 52 percent lower than USA median salary.

(Veterans Assistance Commission of Winnebago County Salaries, 2024)

	2017	2018	2019	2020
VAC Employees	5	5	5	5
Avg. Annual Wage			\$23,440	\$20,953

Table 2 Average Salary 2017 - 2020

	2021	2022	2023	2024
VAC Employees	6	6	6	9
Avg. Annual Wage	\$22,611	\$29,293	\$23,787	\$50,120

Table 3 Average Salary 2021 - 2024

Lastly, the VACWC added an in-office Notary which is available at no charge for Veterans and their families to utilize.

Challenges

Fiscal year 2024 has brought about many challenges most notably the attempt of the VACWC to utilize the provisions, specific to funding, emphasized in Public Acts [102-732](#) and [102-1132](#) as well as the provisions outlined in [330 ILCS 45](#) .

*(330 ILCS 45/2 (1)) The supervisor of general assistance or **the county board shall provide such sums of money as may be just and necessary to be drawn by the commander, quartermaster or commandant of any veterans service organization, in the city or town, or the superintendent of any Veterans' Assistance Commission of the county, upon the recommendation of the assistance committee of that veterans service organization or Veterans' Assistance Commission.***

*(B) **The minimum amount to be provided annually to Veterans Assistance Commissions is provided in Section 12-21.13 of the Illinois Public Aid Code, unless the delegates of the County Veterans Assistance Commission determine that a lesser amount covers the just and necessary sums***

(bold-faced emphasis added)

The Winnebago County Board took it upon themselves to formulate the amount needed to fund the just and necessary needs, salaries and operations of the VACWC for FY 2025. The County Board decided to construe the terms “minimum amount to be provided” in 330 ILCS 45/2(B) as the amount the county had the authority to determine to fund. Despite multiple attempts to inform members of the county finance committee, the county finance team, and the full board that the determination of the just and necessary needs of the VACWC, along with the funds required to pay its employees, was the determination of the VACWC alone and not the county,

these efforts were disregarded. The action of the county led to a Five Hundred Thousand Dollar deficit (\$500,000) in the VACWC's approved fiscal year 2025 budget.

*53... Thus, under section 2 of the Act, the VAC submits its recommendation for its direct assistance budget to the county board, **and the county board either approves or disapproves the recommendation.** If the county board disapproves of the recommendation, the VAC may submit a new recommendation for a different amount or may seek a writ of mandamus. Veterans Assistance Comm'n , [274 Ill. App. 3d at 37](#), [210 Ill.Dec. 920, 654 N.E.2d 219](#)*

[Lavite v. Dunstan, 434 Ill. Dec. 960, 976 \(Ill. App. Ct. 2019\)](#)

(bold-faced emphasis added)

By [Anthony Ferretti](#)

Published: Sep. 27, 2024 at 11:25 PM CDT



(WIFR) - The Winnebago County Board approves its \$73.5 million fiscal year 2025 budget Thursday evening, but one organization isn't pleased with how much the board allocated for them.

The Veterans Assistance Commission (VAC) proposed \$1.6 million and the board allocated \$1.1 million. Now the organization gets the state's attorney's office involved.

The VAC claims the county board has no authority to modify or reject their proposal, but the Winnebago County State's Attorney sent a letter to the commission stating the board isn't required to simply rubber stamp whatever is proposed.

Winnebago County Board member Paul Arena says the budget the board approved Thursday has a more than \$2 million operational deficit because there are more needs than they have income.

Figure 4 WIFR Article Board to allocate 1.1 million

Budget Deficit Impact

The \$500,000 budget cut has significantly impacted critical services, including transportation and staffing.

The VA's FY23 GDX report reveals that 31.9% of Veterans in Winnebago County (4,486 unique patients) utilize VA healthcare services, exceeding the state average by 5.7% (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, n.d.). This demonstrates a significant reliance on VA healthcare by Veterans in the county.

However, due to this year's budget cuts, the Veterans Assistance Commission of Winnebago County (VACWC) was forced to suspend local Veteran transportation services to healthcare appointments and lay off our full-time driver. These measures have had a profound negative impact on many Veterans, surviving spouses, and families in Winnebago County.

The VACWC also forecast a budget shortfall heading into the 4th quarter of fiscal year 2025. Commissioners have mentioned reducing the level of support provided in the financial assistance program in order to land inside this shortfall. Cutting assistance to veterans and their eligible families has been a code Americans vowed not to break. I intend to maintain that code and work through the mandamus or mediation process to cure this deficit.

Veterans Assistance Commission suspends one transportation service

ROCKFORD, Ill. (WIFR) - The Veterans Assistance Commission (VAC) of Winnebago County offers two transportation services though one of them is suspended until further notice while they push for more funding.

Local medical transportation provided to veterans with one of their vehicles will be suspended until further notice. This is because the VAC is responsible for operation costs.

The commission's superintendent says this is a service they wanted to expand, but now has to cut back because their budget is \$500,000 less than expected. The superintendent says one alternative is getting a free bus pass from the Rockford mass transit district. Last month the commission put its \$1.6 million budget proposal in front of the county board. They were only able to receive \$1.1 million.

Figure 5 VACWC Suspends Transportation Services

The budget cut also created challenges during salary negotiations with an employee, who subsequently submitted their resignation shortly after the announcement of the FY 2025 salaries.

In accordance with 330 ILCS 45/2(2), the VACWC will be seeking relief through mandamus action. A comparison of the fiscal year 2024 and 2025 budgets is in a table below for review.

Attorney General Informal Opinion I-24-008 opines 330 ILCS 45/10(e) imposes an affirmative obligation to pay from its general fund items highlighted in yellow. (Creel, 2024)

[\(330 ILCS 45/10\)](#)

(e) The county shall provide for the funding of the office and provide all necessary furnishings, supplies, and services as passed by the county board in its annual appropriation, and the county shall provide or fund services, including, but not limited to, human resources and payroll support; information technology services and equipment; telephone services and equipment; printing services and equipment; postage costs; and liability insurance. Any litigation or legal settlement that has a financial impact to the county is subject to the approval of the county board.

(bold-faced emphasis added)

		FY 2024	FY 2025	Difference
41110	Salaries	\$447,000.00	\$523,644.00	\$76,644.00
41231	IMRF	\$35,760.00	\$30,000.00	(\$5,760.00)
	Payroll Taxes	\$44,700.00	\$40,059.01	(\$4,640.99)
41241	FICA		\$35,000.00	\$35,000.00
41221	Life Insurance		\$600.00	\$600.00
48211	Health Insurance	\$57,250.00	\$135,000.00	\$77,750.00
	Personnel Total	\$584,710.00	\$764,303.01	\$179,593.01
43991	Veterans Assistance	\$478,453.00	\$500,000.00	\$21,547.00
43942	Instruction & Schooling	\$10,000.00	\$20,000.00	\$10,000
43941	Dues and Membership	\$1,750.00	\$1,500.00	(\$250.00)
43810	Building Rental	\$50,000.00	\$130,000.00	\$80,000
	Insurances All		\$6,000.00	\$6,000.00
43731	Auto Repair/operation/recap	\$35,900.00	\$19,000.00	(\$16,900)
43420	Advertising	\$18,787.00	\$30,000.00	\$11,213.00
43310	Travel		\$20,000.00	\$20,000.00
43220	Postage	\$900.00	\$5,000.00	\$4,100.00
43212	Cell Phone		\$10,000.00	\$10,000.00
43190	Other Professional Services	\$64,500.00	\$100,000.00	\$35,500.00
43167	Software Subscription		\$6,000.00	\$6,000.00
43159	Event & Speaker		\$8,000.00	\$8,000.00
42250	Food & Beverage		\$5,000.00	\$5,000.00
42240	Gas & Oil		\$5,000.00	\$5,000.00
42110	Supplies	\$35,000.00	\$10,000.00	(\$25,000.00)
	Operations Total	\$695,290.00	\$875,500.00	
	Grand Total	\$1,280,000.00	\$1,639,803.01	
	Board Approved	\$1,115,000.00	\$1,119,000.00	
	Shortage		(\$520,803.01)	

Table 4 Budget Comparison

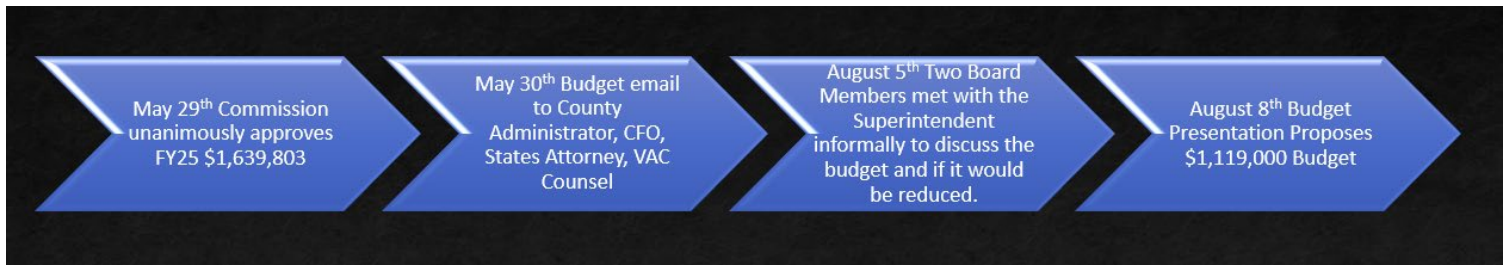


Figure 6 Budget timeline – Budget announced September 27th, 2024

	VAC	Finance	Purchasing	SOA
Regular Salaries	\$526,644.00	\$581,393.60	\$326,917.34	\$747,752.85
# of Employees	9	6		14
Life Insurance	\$600.00	\$273.00	\$227.50	\$592.00
IMRF – Employer Contribution	\$30,000			
FICA – Employer Contribution	\$35,000			
Payroll Taxes	\$40,059.01			
Total	\$629,303.01	\$581,666.60	\$327,144.84	\$748,344.85

Figure 7 Personnel budget comparison to county departments – Employer contributions for the county are not shown or accounted for here.

Financial Assistance

The Commission extends financial support to all Honorable or General Under Honorable Conditions discharged Veterans and their families, encompassing various forms of assistance such as rental and mortgage aid, utility payments, assistance for medically indigent individuals, emergency shelter for homeless Veterans, those at risk of homelessness, and those displaced by natural disasters. Additionally, the Commission provides burial assistance for indigent Veterans. This year the VACWC provided \$495,951.00 in financial assistance to qualified veterans and applicants.

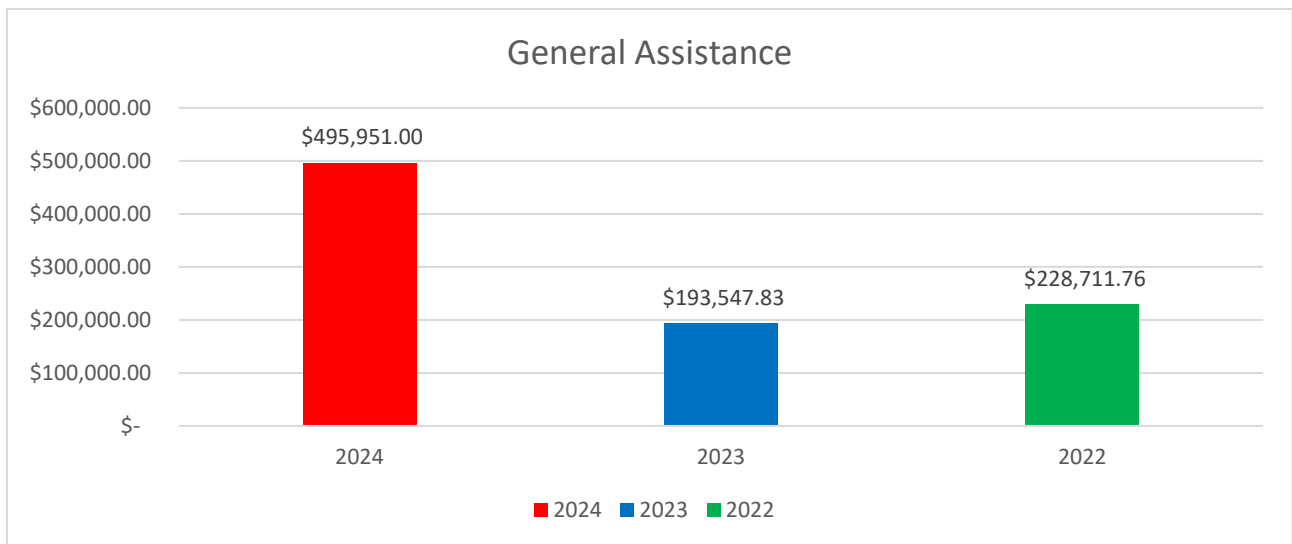


Figure 8 General Assistance Chart

Veteran Benefits Application Assistance and Representation

In the FY23 GDX Report Winnebago County ranked 8th in Veteran population and 96th out of 102 counties in the State of Illinois in disability compensation utilization. However, Winnebago County ranked 57th in the State of Illinois in VA Healthcare utilization by Veterans.

In fiscal year 2024 the VACWC implemented a customer relation platform and we were able to account for 205 VA Power of Attorneys, 78 applications for disability compensation, 150 Intent to file, and a total of 737 forms completed by our Veterans Service Officers.

Outlook for Fiscal Year 2025

As we address the mandamus related to the fiscal year 2025 budget, we foresee potential funding disputes arising during the planning process for the fiscal year 2026 budget. Should similar resistance occur regarding the FY 2026 budget, it is likely that another mandamus complaint will be necessary to seek relief. Additionally, the VACWC continues to evaluate potential locations that would best serve the needs of both the Commission and the Veterans of the County

The Superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Winnebago County is committed to collaborating with the County Board to carefully manage our future fiscal requirements. This collaboration aims to ensure the effective operation of a well-staffed and efficient Veterans Assistance Commission.

References

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