

# Daily Herald

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## Daily Herald opinion: Lawmakers must work to minimize impact of veterans law on county budgets



A new Illinois law will help county agencies like the Veterans Assistance Commission of Lake County in Gurnee do more to serve local veterans, but counties worry it may require them to transfer funds from other needs. (Paul Valade / Staff Photographer)

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*This editorial is the consensus opinion of the Daily Herald Editorial Board*

County Veterans Affairs Commissions serve an important role in getting needed assistance to men and women who have served our country and need help in various ways, including getting health care, fighting hunger or homelessness and dealing with mental health issues.

So, new revisions to Illinois law aiming to ensure they get the services they need have real value. But county governments see a catch.

Many say the law mandates certain levels of spending but doesn't provide a mechanism for funding them. Facing the prospect of having to more than quadruple the \$1.3 million it budgeted for its VAC, the Lake County Board wrestled with that challenge at an emergency meeting last week.

The law, which applies to every county in the state except Cook, allows county VACs to set budgets up to 0.02% of their county's equalized assessed valuation and does not allow county governments to modify them. In Lake County, that could mean boosting the VAC budget to as much as \$5.8 million next year. In a story last Sunday by our Doug T. Graham, Andrew Tangen, who is both the Lake County VAC executive director and president of the state association for veterans assistance, said the Lake agency will ask for only \$5 million next year. Even so, the increase is a jolt to the county's spending plans, leaving officials to worry whether they will have to take funds from other needs in order to meet the requirement.

That's a scenario likely to play out repeatedly across the state, though it perhaps ought not be such a shock. Tangen says the law has always required the 0.02% payments, after which a county can appeal to the state for more money if its local VAC needs it. But, he says, most counties have failed to reach that minimum, and the new law merely clarifies the requirement.

Now, counties are scrambling to figure out how to meet the obligation.

Joe McCoy, executive director of the head of the Illinois Association of counties said the agency is pushing to get lawmakers to modify the legislation to exempt money used to meet the VAC requirement from the property tax cap and, in the process, to demand more transparency from county VACs. He said he hopes lawmakers will take up the issue during the November veto session.

They should.

Consider: Even if the Lake County commission can do without the full \$5.8 million it could demand under the law, the \$5 million it says it requires to help all the vets it serves is an eye-opening statement about all the needs that are currently going unmet. There seems little doubt that the money will be put to good use.

Tangen says Lake County's operation is typical for the collar counties, which currently spend between \$600,000 and \$1 million annually on services for veterans.

It's not clear whether simply exempting VAC budgets from the tax cap will solve all the financial issues the new law imposes, and it cannot be overlooked that the practice of exempting even worthy programs piecemeal from the cap could set a dangerous precedent. Still, veterans ought not have to wait to get the help they need, and the ideas McCoy outlined seem a reasonable start toward compromise. Lawmakers, who no doubt appreciate the political points they get from supporting veterans, should go back to the accounting sheets this fall to find ways that also help local governments meet the cost.