

State law aims to boost spending to help veterans, but counties say hold on



The Veterans Assistance Commission of Lake County in Gurnee could get more money in January, unless changes are made to a state law aimed at helping veterans.

(Paul Valade | Staff Photographer)



Doug T. Graham

Updated 8/27/2022 5:10 PM

A state law passed earlier this year could beef up funding for most county Veterans Affairs Commissions tasked with helping veterans.

Suburban veteran aid leaders say the increased budgets will help do away with the long waiting lists that veterans must deal with before receiving help with issues such as hunger, housing or health care.

But the law, which applies to every county except Cook, could be changed before it takes effect due to concerns from county officials over oversight and how much money will be allocated for such services, among other issues.

As written, the new law allows VACs to set budgets up to a maximum of 0.02% of their counties' total equalized assessed property values, and the counties must accommodate them. The state is not providing added funding.

For Lake County, that VAC budget likely would be around \$5.8 million, according to officials. The budget now is \$1.3 million.

Joe McCoy, executive director of the Illinois Association of Counties, told Lake County Board members during an emergency committee meeting earlier this month that several counties have contacted his organization with concerns about the new law.



From left, Veterans Assistance Commission of Lake County Assistant Superintendent Sherry Kruse, Superintendent Andrew Tangen and Chief of Staff John Murray work Thursday in their Gurnee office. In January, more money will be available for the commission to help area veterans thanks to a new state law giving a boost to the such organizations. - Paul Valade | Staff Photographer

Perhaps the chief concern is that counties would have to cut or reduce other programs and services to accommodate the larger VAC budgets.

To address that issue, McCoy said the association would like the law to exempt money used to fund VAC budgets from the county's property tax cap, which limits how much the tax levy can be increased.

The association is also urging that oversight provisions are added to the law to ensure the finances of the veterans commissions are transparent to the public.

McCoy said the association would support delaying the law's effective date if more time is needed to make the desired improvements.

But some advocates say any delay in implementing the new law would hurt veterans.

Andrew Tangen, president of the state association for veterans assistance commissions and the executive director of the Lake County commission, strongly objected to the idea when it was raised last week at the emergency Lake County Board committee meeting.

"I'm sorry, but I will not sit back quietly and wait and allow more Lake County veterans to take their lives," Tangen said.

Tangen said collar county veterans assistance commissions each currently spend between \$600,000 and \$1 million annually on services.

He said all counties are planning to hire new staff members so they can serve more veterans next year, but exact budget figures aren't yet ready.

Tangen said that though the law would allow the Lake County Veterans Assistance Commission to increase its budget to \$5.8 million, the agency aims to spend around \$5 million, an amount that will support every veteran who needs help without waiting lists.

McCoy said state lawmakers likely will put together a trailer bill during the veto session that he said would iron out problems with the law. He said the veto session is expected to be called around Thanksgiving.