

# From the Front Lines to the Front Desk

**L**ibraries near military bases have taken the lead in working with military populations, but both active duty service members and veterans are living in communities throughout Illinois and elsewhere. In working with the U.S. Department of Defense MWR (Morale, Welfare and Recreation) Libraries, the Illinois Library Association (ILA) has developed a strong interest in the issue and begun gathering examples and ideas from libraries in Illinois and around the country.

Isolation is one of the most common problems faced by today's veterans, and libraries could play a valuable role in connecting veterans to the broader community. Erica Borggren, director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, has an eye-opening suggestion: instead of developing programs to attract veterans to the library, work with a small group or even a single veteran in your community to present programming to community members from a veteran's perspective. Borggren suggests contacting a local National Guard or Reserve unit and hosting a "meet a veteran" program as a simple and elegant way to begin. The interaction between veteran and civilian populations can start building the relationships that will grow into relevant and effective programming not only at the library, but also community wide.

## MARRIED, WITH CHILDREN

The first step is getting a picture of today's military families — where they are, who they are, how many they are. Here's a demographic snapshot of US veterans and service members by the numbers:

1. 22.4 million veterans as of 2010 census, constituting about 7.5 percent of the total US population
2. 2.2 million service members (as of May 2010)
3. 55 percent of the force is married and 40 percent have two children
4. Only 37 percent live on military installations; 63 percent live in over 4,000 communities
5. Growing number of women service members and veterans
6. Since late 2001, National Guard and Reserve units have been activated and deployed overseas, with more than 300,000 called to action.

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As more veterans return from deployment, the numbers — and needs — are on the upswing. In Pierce County, Washington, for example, which houses the major Joint Lewis McChord Base, over 6,000 service members will be processed out in the coming year. While some will leave the immediate area, many will stay. Combined with service members returning to the area from other locations, an estimated 13,000 recently discharged veterans will settle in the state of Washington. In Illinois, both Lake and DuPage County are seeing increases in veteran populations, as are a number of other communities.

Veterans and active duty service members make up a diverse community of individuals — a range of ages, ethnic backgrounds, etc. — with shared experiences.

- Recently discharged veterans face a far different set of circumstances than veterans of long-standing. Not only are they younger, they are also in a much greater state of transition.
- In Illinois, the largest share those returning from recent deployment are National Guard or reservists.
- In the case of active duty service members, living on or off base creates a different set of available services and needs.



## LIBRARIES AS LINKS, AND MORE

Developing a set of links to online information portals that are of particular interest to veterans could be a terrific cooperative project by a group of libraries, one that could be shared and then customized. This might be especially useful in the area of e-government access, i.e., forms, documents, government agencies, etc. The proliferation of information with no very clear pathway or central point is a huge challenge to those both seeking and providing services.

The linkage that libraries can provide includes both electronic access, as well as a wide range of programs and services that provide human connections. Illinois examples range from modest to more ambitious, at public and academic libraries, often involving schools and students as well as other agencies in the community.

- An area vet picks up books once a month from the Vernon Area Public Library in Lincolnshire and delivers them to the VA Medical Center in North Chicago. The Putnam County Library mounted a display of photos of veterans in the spring of 2011 and continues to post new photos all the time. In Wilmette, the library hosts monthly “Veterans’ Roundtables,” primarily intended for older vets from World War II and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. The Skokie Military Families Helpline, largely targeted at more recent vets, posts their information on Skokie Net, a service of the Skokie Public Library.
- Instead of having a book group meet at the library, why not schedule something at the American Legion? That’s what Arlington Heights Memorial Library (AHML) did in February with a discussion of the book *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* by Chris Kyle at the local Legion club. The event was promoted at the library and in the community, and copies of the book were available for checkout. Refreshments and a cash bar rounded out the evening. According to Programs Manager Christina Stoll, “The program was a huge success, hitting our target audience of local veterans over fifty-five, who in the past have not typically attended library book discussions. The eighteen customers at the program were engaged in the discussion and came away wanting more programs like this.”
  - In 2012, AHML worked with a nonprofit group, Veterans in Transition, to host a job seekers program focusing on resources for veterans. While the program was originally targeted at younger veterans recently returned from active duty, it drew an older audience as well of eight veterans, mostly over fifty-five. The speaker was able to adapt the program to a group discussion, allowing for personal feedback to each of the participants.

- Gail Borden Public Library District (GBPLD) in Elgin has been hosting a variety of veterans programs since 2008, when they participated in the Library of Congress Veterans History Project celebrating local veterans in a variety of ways, including multi-generational projects with middle school students and veterans. More recent projects include a variety of approaches, audiences, and community connections:
  - In 2012, GBPLD screened *The Invisible War*, a Sundance Film Festival Audience Award-winner dealing with rape in the military with a discussion leader from a veterans' mental health agency. The program was co-sponsored by a wide range of women's groups in the community.
  - The library is also piloting monthly veterans' employment workshops on Friday afternoons in partnership with the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) in Elgin.
  - In fall 2013, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* will serve as the central theme for a series of programs, including a half-scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, and has attracted volunteers from both Sam's Club and Chase, who have returning veteran programs as employment priorities.
- There's a mix of past and present in recent and upcoming programs at Booth Library at Eastern Illinois University, which recently received the Governor's Award for Excellence in Education from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs. The university was cited for "going above and beyond basic veterans' services while fostering a veteran-friendly atmosphere." In April, the library hosted the Illinois Fallen Heroes Traveling Memorial Wall, co-sponsored by the Department of Veterans Services, inviting the public to find information on the wall about friends and family members. And an after-hours event at the library is planned for fall semester to welcome student veterans and their families. In addition to food and drink, library services and resources will be showcased, including the opportunity to meet with subject librarians. There will be story time and crafts for children and library card sign-up for non-student adults who can check out books and use the computer labs. The event is intended to provide opportunities for student veterans to socialize and make connections with other veterans on campus.

## AWARENESS AND CONNECTIONS

At least in part because of its proximity to a major armed forces base, Pierce County Library in Washington became involved with wider community efforts to address the needs of military

families. A comprehensive survey was undertaken in 2010–2011, identifying everything from where service members lived in the community to family size and interests, ranging from cultural activities to outdoor recreation to safety. See [jblm-growth.com/plan](http://jblm-growth.com/plan).

Pierce County Library Director Neel Parikh was part of the planning team, and while library services per se are not a major part of the plan, the awareness and relationships that developed are significant. One outcome, for example, was installing a special reader on library computers that allows service members to access secure base computers. Parikh explains that this never would have happened without formal and informal connections that led the military community to the library and the library's ability to be seen as a trusted and valuable partner. The library developed a number of specific resources, including a bibliography for children of deployed parents and resources for educators on how to work with children of military families. See <http://military.mypcls.org/resources-for-military-families/> for more examples.

Other libraries close to major bases, such as San Diego Public Library, are providing thoughtful and useful guides to help recognize and address the diversity within the population. Librarian Kristen Mulvihill developed a simple slide share pointing out that the isolation following discharge from the military is something libraries can address, if they can find a way to make connections. Her slide share at <http://www.slideshare.net/kmulvihill/veterans-and-public-libraries-in-san-diego> offers a number of suggestions.

Eli Williamson, a decorated veteran who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan and now directs the Veterans Program for the McCormick Foundation, suggests an asset libraries take for granted has immediate value to local groups and organizations: "Libraries have infrastructure that veterans need, just in terms of things like meeting rooms. If we can let veterans know this is an available option, and they start to meet at the library, they'll find all kinds of other services that interest them."

The McCormick Foundation supports another important resource for Illinois veterans, one in which libraries may be able to participate. Illinois Joining Forces (IJF) is a network of public and not-for-profit organizations working together to improve services to Illinois' military and veteran communities. The goal is to increase awareness and connections among member organizations to make it easier for people to find resources, reduce duplication, and increase overall capacity. Members collaborate via working groups and update their services and events on an online platform at [www.illinoisjoiningforces.org](http://www.illinoisjoiningforces.org). ILA and other library groups are entering into discussions with IJF to explore roles for libraries in working groups and welcome members to join in the conversation. **ILA**