

2024 ANNUAL REPORT



ILLINOIS JOINING FORCES
Supporting Service Members, Veterans, and their Families

2024 LEADERSHIP MESSAGE



Brenda Osuch
Executive Director

On behalf of Illinois Joining Forces (IJF), I am pleased to present our fiscal year 2024 annual report. This was a year of progress, persistence and growth all fueled by our mission to bring together public, private, and government stakeholders to collaboratively support Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF) – including caregivers and survivors – regardless of discharge status.

This year, while we celebrated numerous accomplishments, our most profound success lies in the connections we cultivated. We worked diligently to strengthen bonds between Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) dedicated to improving the lives of Veterans, ensuring that no Veteran faces their journey alone. By fostering a sense of unity among Veterans themselves, we not only reminded them that support is available, but also linked them to critical resources and services designed to empower and support their continued success.

As detailed in this report, our initiatives included extensive outreach efforts across Illinois, participating in over 160 events for the Veteran community, hosting four summits, and organizing three Military Night Out & Veteran Resource Fairs. We also launched a new partnership model with VSOs to streamline referrals to community-based services. Through our Care Coordination Center (CCC) and Connect Illinois CARES programs, we assisted over 700 Veterans, Service Members, and their Families, ensuring access to essential resources spanning the social determinants of health and more to include; financial assistance, employment, food security, housing, and mental health services.

This report is not only a celebration of IJF's accomplishments; it stands as a testament to the strength of community and connection. Each achievement reflects the commitment of our dedicated team, the tireless efforts of Veteran Serving Organizations, and the generosity of our donors. Your support has been instrumental in driving meaningful change and positively impacting those we serve. Together, we are building a stronger community for all Illinois Veterans, Service Members, and their Families.

As we look forward to the future, we remain committed to deepening these connections, enabling Veterans to thrive through the support of a community that stands together in service and solidarity. We are proud of all that has been accomplished and also excited about what the year ahead will bring. Thank you for being part of IJF's journey.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in dark blue ink that reads "Brenda Osuch".

Brenda Osuch
Executive Director
Illinois Joining Forces



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VISION

Make Illinois the most welcoming and supportive state in the Nation for all Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF) – a place where SMVF can find growth, wellness, and community.

MISSION

Bring together public, private, and government stakeholders to collaboratively support SMVF – to include caregivers and survivors – regardless of status.

GOALS

- To ensure Illinois SMVF can access a gateway to connect and navigate to the services and resources they need; where and when they need them.
- To eliminate barriers to accessing care for the Illinois SMVF community and reduce risk factors that contribute to suicide.
- To expand our access to service and resource providers by creating partnerships that ensure we meet the needs of the Illinois SMVF community.
- To develop, engage, and partner with regionally based community hubs of support, and to foster local collaborations to better support the Illinois SMVF community.
- To convene service providers and the SMVF community for the purpose of education, collaboration, and connection.
- To ensure that no Service Member, Veteran, or Family member, regardless of status, is left behind.





OPERATION CONNECT ILLINOIS

IJF Continues to:

- **Expand outreach efforts** to ensure statewide access to providers, connecting and supporting SMVF throughout Illinois. Focused efforts will target hard-to-reach communities, including rural, women, and LGBTQ+ Veterans.
- **Create national, state, local and community partnerships** that will assist in serving Illinois SMVF by creating a collaborative infrastructure that bridges gaps between local, regional, and statewide organizations.
- **Educate, connect, and collaborate** through convening statewide and regional summits where Veteran Serving Organizations, government agencies, and community organizations can come together, share insights, and coordinate efforts.

Accomplishments: Fiscal Year 2024



NEW STAFF

IJF expanded our reach by adding a staff member in Southern Illinois.



120% INCREASE IN OUTREACH EVENTS ATTENDED

IJF increased its outreach events attended by **over 120%** growing from **75 to 167 events**. This expansion enabled IJF to **connect with over 1,200 service providers** across Illinois.



300+ PROVIDER ATTENDEES

IJF brought together over **300 representatives from Veteran-serving organizations** throughout Illinois by hosting **1 statewide and 3 regional summits** in Aurora, Peoria and O'Fallon covering Northern, Central and Southern Illinois.



PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE

In late FY24, IJF launched a formalized partnership initiative resulting in **14 applicants for partnership**.

OPERATION CONNECT ILLINOIS – CARES (Case Management, Assessment, Resource Referral, Education & Support)

IJF Care Coordination Center (CCC)

The CCC is available 24/7/365 to connect Service Members, Veterans, and their Families to the critical assistance they need, where and when they need it. Our Veteran peers provide case management and high-touch holistic resource navigation.

The Staff Sergeant Gordon Parker Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP)

Awarded through the US Department of Veterans Affairs, IJF is the only Illinois statewide organization selected as a grant recipient for a second consecutive year. IJF provides a supportive upstream approach to suicide prevention through outreach, education, assessment, case management and resource referral.


Illinois Warrior Assistance Program (IWAP)


Through a partnership with the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, IWAP offers a support line for veterans facing emotional challenges. IWAP is not a crisis hotline, but a warm helpline that provides confidential assistance. Veterans and their families can reach out to IWAP 24/7/365 for support on a wide range of issues, from managing post-traumatic stress to coping with anxiety and depression.


Rapid Response Fund

IJF has recognized a growing need for emergency financial assistance within the SMVF community. To address this, IJF offers prompt access to funds for crucial needs such as food, shelter, and transportation during challenging times. This emergency financial support helps alleviate stress, prevent further financial issues, reduce anxiety, and enhance overall mental well-being. Additionally, it allows IJF to connect the SMVF community with resources aimed at fostering long-term stability.


Accomplishments: Fiscal Year 2024

 **79%** IJF had a **79% increase in service requests** received, serving over **700** Service Members, Veterans, and their Families with over **1200 services**.


 **78** **78 SMVF** supported through Rapid Response Fund, totaling more than **\$15,000 in support**.

 Top requested areas of support were **housing, food & transportation**.

The Staff Sergeant Fox Suicide Prevention Grant provides critical funding to enhance suicide prevention efforts in Illinois.

 **325%** **Over 325% increase in Veterans screened** for SSG Fox Eligibility, totaling **410 Veterans**.

 **300** IJF hosted **3 Resource Fairs** throughout the state of Illinois connecting with over **300 SMFV**.

 **2,000+** IJF attended over **165 events** connecting with over **2,000 SMFV**.

BEYOND THANK YOU: How Veterans Really Want to Be Appreciated

When thinking about expressing gratitude to Veterans, the first thing that often comes to mind is often a simple, verbal “Thank you for your service.” While this gesture is goodhearted, IJF wanted to dig deeper into how Veterans feel about this phrase and discover more meaningful ways to honor their service.

To understand better, IJF conducted a survey involving nearly 300 Veterans from diverse backgrounds and branches of service. The findings highlighted the importance of intentional in how we express our appreciation.

WHAT WE LEARNED:

73% OF VETERANS

are neutral or prefer not to personally be thanked for their service.

+2/3 OF VETERANS

say donating to a Veteran Service Organization is how they want to be thanked.

Here are the top three ways Veterans said they want to be supported beyond hearing ‘thank you’:



Support and contributions to organizations that assist Veterans



Provide job opportunities



Offer discounts and benefits



TAKEAWAY

These responses make it clear that while a verbal “thank you” is appreciated, Veterans are looking for more impactful ways to feel valued. Donating to veteran service organizations, offering job opportunities, and offering tangible benefits are meaningful actions that truly honor those who have served.

IMPACT SPOTLIGHT

Assessing the Need

Anna*, a brave female veteran, found herself in a dire situation, fleeing domestic violence in Collinsville, Illinois. Isolated in a hotel, she had exhausted all local resources, including Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) funding. In urgent need of permanent housing, she realized that moving north could provide her access to more extensive resources.

The Process: Resource Referral

Recognizing the gravity of her plight, the Illinois Joining Forces (IJF) call center stepped in to assist her. IJF immediately covered the cost of her hotel stay and arranged for her to connect with Featherfist, a Veteran housing and support organization based in Chicago. The prospect of moving to a city with more options offered a glimmer of hope.

Her journey, marked by courage and resilience, stands as a testament to the transformative power of coordinated support.

Upon her arrival in Chicago, Anna was linked with America Works, a workforce development program for veterans. Within just a week, she successfully **secured employment**, marking a significant turning point in her life.

Understanding that holistic care is crucial for female veterans, IJF also connected Anna with the National Women Veterans United, a community that provided **essential emotional and social support**. This connection allowed her to share her experiences and build lasting relationships with others who understood her journey.

To ensure Anna's **well-being and stability**, she was enrolled in IJF's Staff Sergeant Gordon Parker Fox Suicide Prevention Program. This additional layer of support provided her with high touch **case management** as she navigated the complexities of her new life.

The Impact

Anna reached out to IJF again, this time expressing interest in remote employment opportunities. Once more, IJF acted quickly, connecting her with The Lighthouse where she secured a remote position, providing her with gainful employment and **financial stability**.

With the help of a HUD-VASH voucher, Anna stabilized her housing situation, moving into a **safe, permanent home**. Her journey, marked by courage and resilience, stands as a testament to the transformative power of coordinated support.

Through the combined efforts of various organizations, Anna transitioned from **crisis to stability**, demonstrating that a coordinated network to include housing, employment, peer support, and mental health care, can change lives. Her story is not just one of survival but of empowerment and hope for all veterans facing similar challenges.

**Name has been changed to respect the privacy of the Veteran.*



COMMUNITY IMPACT



Illinois Joining Forces has been instrumental in helping us build stronger relationships within the veteran-serving community. By participating in IJF-sponsored events and collaborative initiatives, we've connected with other organizations that provide complementary services. This has led to joint programs, shared resources, and stronger referral pathways. These connections allow us to offer a more holistic approach to serving veterans, ensuring that no need goes unmet through a fragmented system."

- Christopher E. Williams Jr.,
*MBA, Executive Director,
Eagles Nest of St Clair County*



IJF does a great job supporting all Veterans whether they qualify for services through the VA or not. This increases better outcomes for Veterans that are in danger of suicide because it can increase their connections and other protective factors."

- Michelle Augoustatos,
*LCSW, Community Engagement & Partnerships Coordinator,
Suicide Prevention Program, Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital*

LOOKING FORWARD



Champion SMVF issues throughout Illinois

Illinois Joining Forces will organize educational initiatives and convenings aimed at raising awareness and fostering collaboration among stakeholders to improve access to services for SMVF.

Advance Impact through Collaboration

Illinois Joining Forces will continue developing a robust network of partnerships with national, state, and local vetted Veteran service providers to best support Illinois' diverse SMVF community.

Elevate Access to Resources and Care

Illinois Joining Forces will serve as the central coordinating entity for SMVF services in Illinois, ensuring success to comprehensive support and resources that address the evolving needs of SMVF.

Ensure Long-term Sustainability

Illinois Joining Forces is committed to diversifying funding sources, enhancing fundraising efforts, and implementing sound financial management practices to ensure long-term sustainability

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

THE
DUCHOSSOIS FAMILY
FOUNDATION



Illinois Joining Forces is grateful for the generous support of community partners, including The Duchossois Family Foundation (TDF). Over the past three years, TDF has committed more than \$1 million to advance IJF's efforts to connect Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF) with services and support in their local communities. Beyond financial resources, TDF's leadership and advocacy has been instrumental to IJF's growth to the organization it is today.

The Duchossois Family Foundation strives to empower individuals to enhance their quality of life through wellness and economic opportunity, with a specific commitment to supporting our nation's Veteran population.

TDF's existing and future work focuses on ensuring Veterans and their families have access to job services, career opportunities, mental health, and well-being support to diminish food and housing insecurity, social isolation, substance abuse, and suicide. TDF has a deep commitment to connect, collaborate, and convene with others, with the goal of strengthening opportunities for Veterans and building awareness and support that helps them to succeed during their re-entry to civilian life.

“Through its leadership and collaborative efforts, IJF is making significant strides in enriching the lives of Veterans and their families across Illinois. The Duchossois Family Foundation is honored to support IJF's work, which we know is vital to ensuring more Illinois Veterans and their families have access to the services and resources they need and deserve.”

- **Mary Ann Roeser,**
President, The Duchossois Family Foundation



Thanks to the following grant and corporate donors whose support makes IJF's mission a reality:



**STAFF SERGEANT PARKER
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PREVENTION GRANT
PROGRAM**

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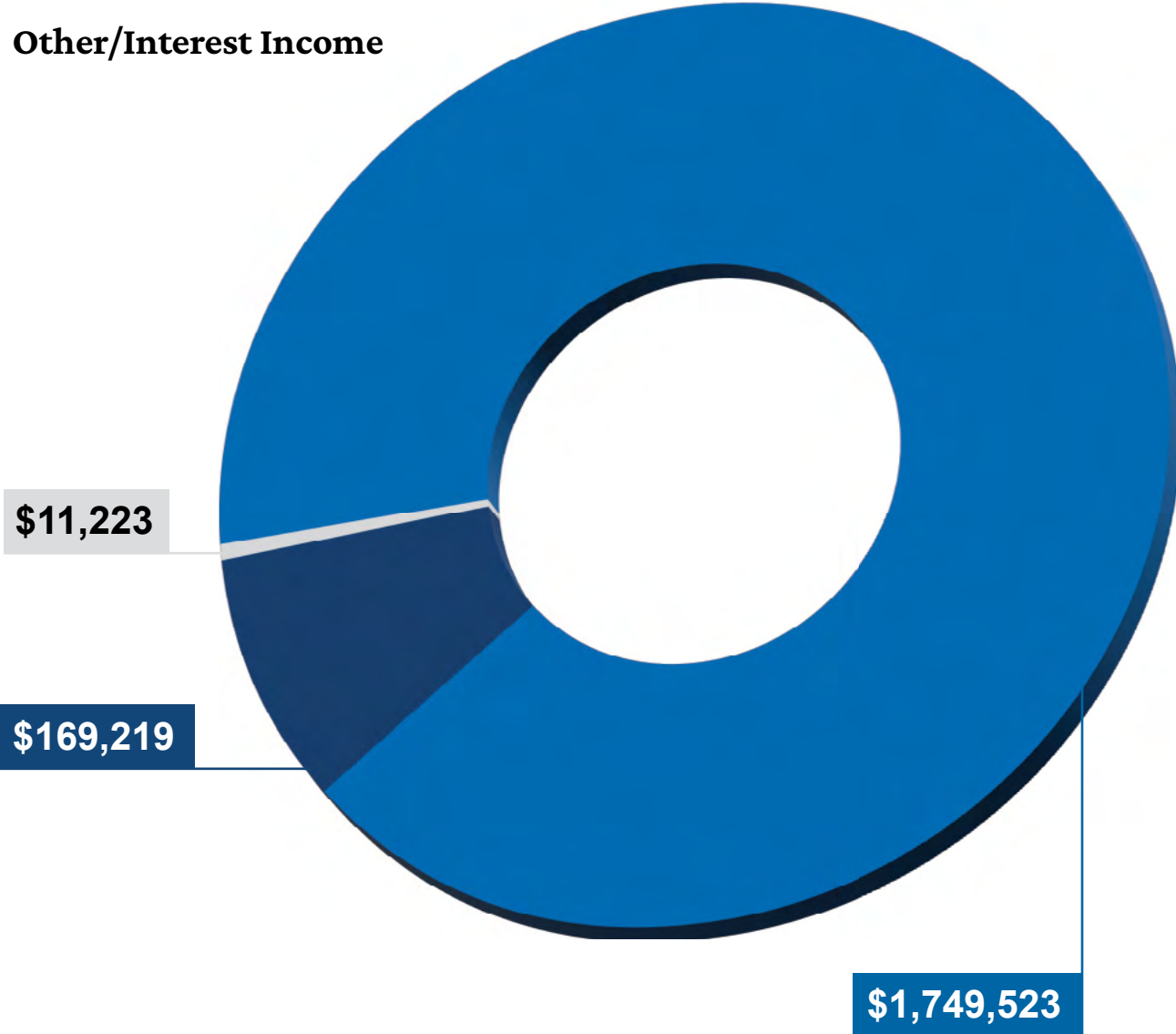
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FINANCIALS

Revenue*

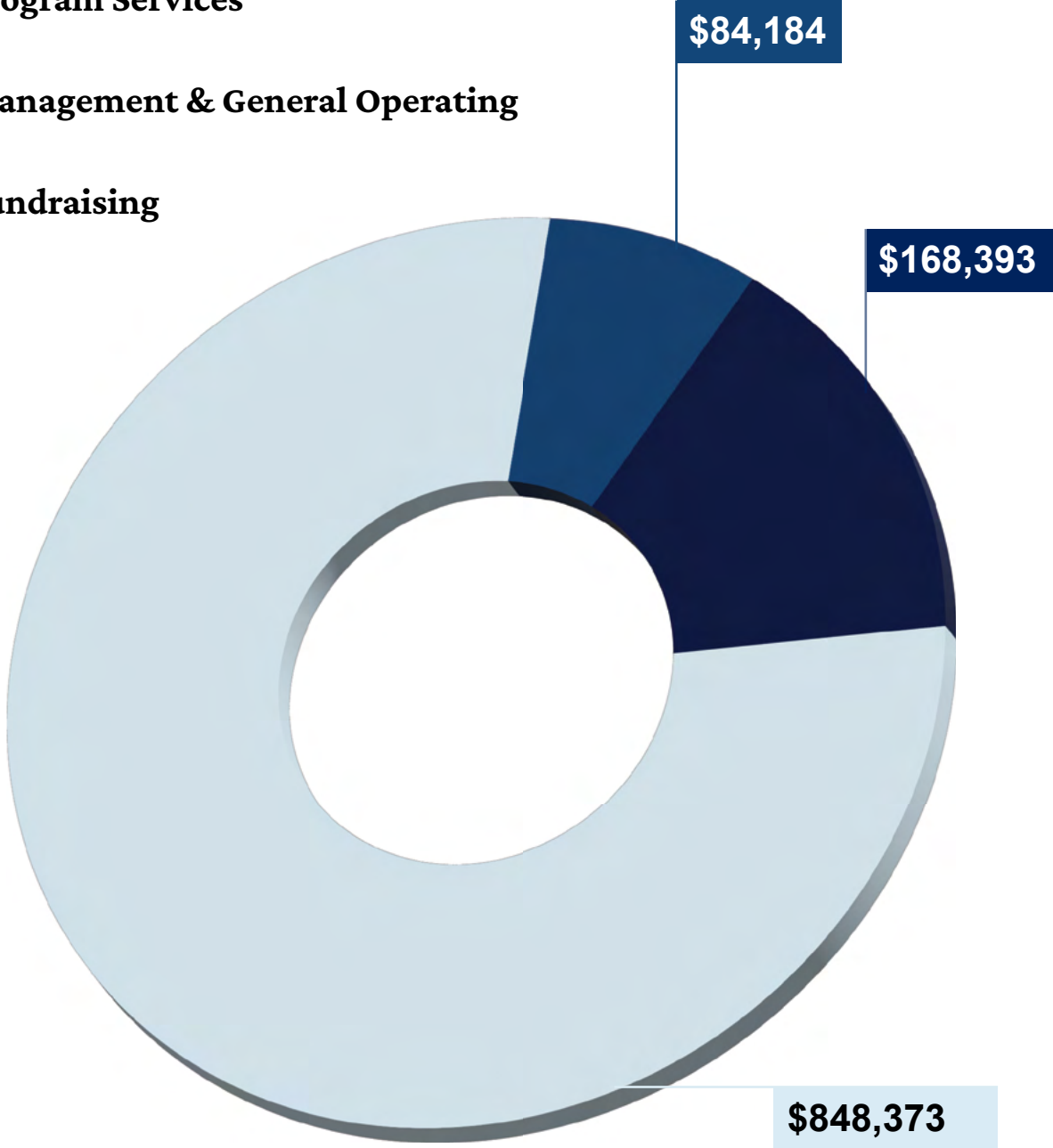
- Grant/Contract
- Event Fundraising/ Contributions
- Other/Interest Income



*Amounts represent contributions received in FY24.

Expenses

- Program Services
- Management & General Operating
- Fundraising



“

**No one organization can do it all.
But together we can do anything.**

”



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