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MAYOR EMANUEL EXPANDS RESOURCES TO SERVE CHICAGO'S VETERANS

City Launches New Resource Website to Support Veterans, Designates a Director to Lead the Office of Veterans Affairs

Mayor Rahm Emanuel today launched a new resource website designed to meet the needs of Chicago's military Veterans, and has appointed a new Director to the Chicago Veteran Affairs Office to lead efforts and continue to grow programs and services to help the City's Veterans. In addition, Mayor Emanuel has directed the City's 311 service call center operators to ask callers up front if they are Veterans in order to better direct resources to meet their specialized needs. These investments build on earlier efforts by the City to invest in services to support the needs and employment of Chicago's Veterans.

"We as a City have a responsibility to help our Veterans build a future that is worthy of their sacrifice," said Mayor Emanuel. "While their service can never be fully repaid, we can honor them by providing specialized resources and support for Veterans and their families."

This new website was specifically created to meet the needs of Veterans and active duty members of the Armed Forces, as well as those of their families, and is designed to provide a centralized point of access for services offered by agencies across all levels of government. The website features guidance and information on several service areas, including: Housing, Service and Benefits, Employment, and Emergency Services. The website will also help residents to locate Veterans Resource Centers, Community Service Centers, and Senior Centers for in-person assistance.

To lead coordination efforts, Mayor Emanuel has appointed Victor LaGroon, an ARMY Veteran, to serve as Director of the new Chicago Veteran Affairs Office. In this role, he will direct City efforts to grow programs and services to help Chicago's Veterans. LaGroon's

military career began in 2003 with his enlistment. After completing his Advanced Individual Training at Ft. Huachuca in Military Intelligence, he was assigned to the U.S. Army 10th Mountain Division, Ft. Drum. Since being medically discharged, for the last 10 years, he has worked diligently to serve and advocate for the health needs, benefits and resources of military personnel, Veterans and their families.

“As a Veteran myself, I know how valuable that Veterans services are in supporting those of us who have served our country as they acclimate to life after military service,” said Victor LaGroon, Director of the Chicago Office of Veteran Affairs. “In this role, I look forward to advocating on behalf of Chicago’s Veterans to ensure that they have the support and resources that they need to re-integrate into society, gain meaningful employment, and support their families.”

While the administration has always addressed issues and policy on behalf of our Veterans, the new Veterans Affairs Office marks the first time that the city will dedicate a full-time staffer to specialize in Veterans policy, programs, and engagement. More specifically, the VAO will coordinate veterans services--including those in the interest of education, employment and housing--from citywide departments, organizations and agencies across all levels of government on behalf of Chicago’s Veterans.

By directing the City’s 311 service call center operators to ask callers up front if they are Veterans, operators are able to identify the most appropriate resources and programs that are available. Ultimately, this information helps the city tailor, target, and allocate the right resources for future programs and services to better serve Veterans.

“The City’s website is instrumental, not only in helping close the gap between service members and providers, but in strengthening Chicago’s military and veteran community; which, in turn, strengthens the City Of Chicago as a whole,” said James Flagg, Co-Founder of the Warrior Summit Coalition.

To improve citywide coordination, earlier this month a group of Aldermen who have served in the Armed Services assembled a new Veteran Caucus to establish relationships between City Council, city departments, organizations and businesses to collectively advocate for Chicago’s Service Members. The Veteran Caucus formed in February of 2016 to continue the work of retired Alderman James Balcer, 11th Ward, a former Service Member himself and well-known advocate for Veterans across the City throughout his career in Council.

The Veterans Caucus, which will convene monthly, includes six Aldermen; Alderman Gilbert Villegas (36th Ward), Alderman Milly Santiago (31st Ward), Alderman Chris

Taliaferro (29th Ward), Alderman Burke (14th Ward), Alderman Danny Solis (25th Ward) and Alderman Cardenas (12th Ward).

“I was extremely proud when Mayor Emanuel and my fellow Aldermen immediately stepped up to support the Veteran’s community in this time of need,” said Alderman Villegas, 36th Ward. “This caucus is proud to continue Alderman Balcer’s legacy, and we commend the appointment of Victor LaGroon and the launch of this website, which will increase support and services as we work to advocate for our brave Service Members across the city.”

Since taking office, Mayor Emanuel has made key investments to support continued education and employment for Veterans. In launching the Service to Success Initiative at City Colleges of Chicago, Chicago is now able to provide returning Veterans with the support and education necessary to succeed at home. A partnership between the city and the Peoples Gas and the Utility Workers Union (Local 18007) spurred the launch of the Gas Utility Workers Training Program, a classroom and mentorship program prepares military Veterans for careers in the natural gas industry. In addition, Mayor Emanuel established the first-ever Veteran’s preference bid incentive on City contracts, he partnered with companies committing to employ Veterans and worked with the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) to create a Veterans hiring preference.

To ensure that all Veterans and military Service Members are able to secure housing and to prevent discrimination in the housing application process, the City’s Council on Human Relations approved the Mayor’s ordinance making Veterans, active military personnel, reservists and National Guard members a protected class. Additionally, as a participant in national call to end Veteran’s homeless initiative, the City has placed has 1,500 homeless Veterans in secure housing in the first year alone, and has housed approximately 1,800 to date.

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