

EDUCATION & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

OF THE

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

MINUTES

A meeting of the Education & Human Services Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on February 23, 2016.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. Monica Martinez, Chairperson
Leg. Thomas F. Barraga, Vice Chair (excused absence)
Leg. Robert Calarco, DPO
Leg. Kara Hahn
Leg. Leslie Kennedy
Leg. Kate Browning

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

George M. Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature
Amy Ellis, Chief Deputy Clerk/Legislature
Andrew Tarantowicz, Budget Review Office
Ben Zwirn, Suffolk Community College
Kevin Peterman, Suffolk Community College
Lisa Pinkard, Aide to Leg. Martinez
Karen Klafter, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
Seth Squicciarino, Aide to Leg. Hahn
Ali Nazir, Aide to Leg. Kennedy
Michael Pitcher, Director of Communications/PO
Susan F. Friedman, appointee/Suffolk County Youth Board Coordinating Council
Barbara N. Nilsen, President/CEO Rebuilding Together Long Island, Inc.
Frank Zambanini, Rebuilding Together Long Island, Inc.
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 1:09 PM

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Good afternoon and welcome to today's Human -- I'm sorry, Education and Human Services. If we could all stand for the Pledge of Allegiance to be led by Legislator Hahn.

SALUTATION

Thank you. Okay, again, good afternoon. For the record can we just note Legislator Barraga's excused absence. Thank you.

Also, we do not have any correspondence. Do we have any cards, Miss Clerk?

MS. ELLIS:

No, we do not have any cards.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. Anyone in the audience who would like to speak? I know we have -- we have representation from the College. Ben, do you have anything for us today?

MR. ZWIRN:

Just briefly, tomorrow is Higher Education Day up in the State's Capital. And we have a bus load of students and administrators going up there to advocate on behalf of the College for additional FTE aid. So we will be all over. We have meetings with the Majority Leader Flanagan; with Carl Heastie, the Speaker of the Assembly; and Senator LaValle, head of the Higher Ed Committee; and Assemblyman Englebright; and Senator Croci; and Senator Boyle and Assemblyman Thiele. I'm still waiting to hear from Assemblyman Ramos. And I'm sure we'll meet with him. And Assemblywoman Jean-Pierre. So I'm sure they'll -- we'll get to see everybody from pretty much from our delegation.

But we do it every year. And this year we have a good group going up so I hope the weather stays with us. And it's not just -- we just don't come here to advocate before the County Legislature, who's been so good to us, but we also go up to Albany asking them to do their fair share to help our students get an opportunity to get a higher education and the opportunities that come with it.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

I appreciate that. Thank you. And definitely keep us posted. And I'm sure you will and good luck tomorrow.

MR. ZWIRN:

Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Okay. Do we have anyone from Department of Social Services here today? Okay. So he -- I believe he was in Albany today.

LEG. BROWNING:

Hopefully good stuff.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Yeah, hopefully.

INTRODUCTORY RESOLUTIONS

Okay, so we're going to continue with the agenda. We do have a presentation, but we're going to leave that after we do our Introductory Resolution, which is **1104**, and that is **To appoint member of the Suffolk County Youth Board Coordinating Council representing the 17th Legislative District**. And that's **Susan Friedman. (Co. Exec.)** She is here with us today. I'm not sure if anyone on the Committee has questions for Miss Friedman, but please come up. You can sit in the -- yeah, you can sit down, of course; join us; stay a while.

MS. FRIEDMAN:

Good afternoon. Little tech-challenged, I know. I'm happy I'm sitting and I'm happy there's a mike. Okay.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Hi, Susan. So if you could just give us a little background, you know, of yourself and just as to why you're seeking this position on the Youth Board.

MS. FRIEDMAN:

Okay. I am an insurance coverage attorney with Marsh & McLennan Companies. I've been a lawyer for about 23 years or more. Most recently I was involved with the Suffolk County Woman's Advisory Commission. I sat on that commission for three years as a volunteer and I very much enjoyed it. I felt that, you know, we had an opportunity to make an impact in terms of, you know, what direction the County would go in, you know, when it comes to some women's services.

It came to my knowledge that there would be an open position, you know, on the Youth Advisory Council. And I spoke to Lou D'Amaro briefly and I said, you know, I really enjoyed my time with the Suffolk County Women's Advisory Commission. And I have always had a hand in some sort of volunteer work when it comes to youth.

You know, throughout the years, I've been involved in a number of programs, Impacted Youth, Big Brothers Big Sisters, literacy projects, mentoring projects through business, running networking groups, other types of initiatives. I sit as a parent member on the Committee For Special Education in Half Hollow Hills. And I've been involved just in a number of activities and events.

I also understand and appreciate the role that agencies and non-profits play in the entire process. And I did a little research on Suffolk County and I learned, and I might be wrong if there's new data available, but that Suffolk County has the second largest population of youth that's present under the age of 21 in the State, only second to New York City. One-third of the population in Suffolk County is under the age -- is 21 or younger. You know, and I think that it's important or -- you know, more than important, it's vital that the youth in the County have, you know, people who are advocating for them or concerned with their welfare and their protection. And I think that we as a County have an obligation to ensure physical, social, educational, emotional type of growth be it programs that are customized, you know, to all different types of children.

Right before I came here I spoke to my high school senior daughter and I told her what I was doing. And she said, "Okay, mom, you say this," she's telling me, you know, "You are concerned with children with all different types of toolboxes. My toolbox, I'm very academic, I'm going to a good college, you know, and you really didn't have too much to do with me, but I had a lot of advantages that some other students or young people did not have. So you're also concerned with the other toolbox, where maybe they don't have as many advantages, maybe there are socioeconomic issues with them. Remind the committee that we used to do Superbowl Sunday and feed families in emergency housing in Suffolk County and you would bring a lot of children from the Temple to see what it looked like, to see those who do not have as much as you." So it was very interesting

and -- what my daughter said. And I want to teach a value lesson to her that it's always important to give and give back.

So I really very much would like to be part of that entire process and am very interested. And that's really what brought me here today.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Well, thank you. And, Susan, you and I have met on the Advisory Commission and I know many ideas were brought up in that Commission and I'm looking forward to working along with these ladies again. I'm sorry to see you go. I know you were very active in the ideas that were brought forward. But I liked everything you said. As you know, I think youth are very important, that we need to take care of them. So I did appreciate everything you said. I'm not sure if any of our colleagues -- if my colleagues have any questions? Okay, Susan, so there aren't any questions for you. So I'm going to make the motion to approve your appointment.

MS. FRIEDMAN:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Second by Legislator Browning. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion carries. **(VOTE: 5-0-0-1. LEG. BARRAGA NOT PRESENT)** Thank you, Susan.

MS. FRIEDMAN:

Thank you very much, everyone.

PRESENTATION

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Okay, we'll continue now with our agenda and that is our presentation. Today we have with us Rebuilding Together Long Island and we have Barbara Nilson, who is the President and CEO.

SLIDESHOW PRESENTATION

MS. NILSEN:

Good afternoon, Legislators, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Barbara Nilson --

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

I'm sorry, Barbara, if you could just sit down and speak into the mike, please.

MS. NILSEN:

My name is Barbara Nilson. I'm the President and CEO of Rebuilding Together Long Island. And we are the best kept secret on Long Island, especially in Suffolk County.

These are the four people who started (referring). They are Saul and Elaine Goldstein and Roz and Joe Botkin. They started back in 1992. They had been Habitat of Humanity volunteers and they were not happy with just doing one house. They wanted to help the less fortunate across Nassau and Suffolk Counties.

This is our mission. We preserve and revitalize homes and communities. We try to make sure that the low income homeowners are safe and comfortable in their homes, and that they are able to maintain their independence. We work with low income, elderly, veterans, physically-challenged and families with children.

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We have provided repairs to over 2500 low income homeowners since 1992. These are some of the areas that we have worked and these are all volunteers.

We've done over a hundred -- between 100 and 120 projects every year within Nassau and Suffolk Counties through Riverhead. That's as far as we go because we don't have the capability of the volunteers.

The repairs we have done are wheelchair ramps, small plumbing and electrical repairs that do not require licensed contractors. We do weatherstripping; any other home maintenance needs addressing safety risks. We put in grab bars. We do the ramps. We widen doorways. We do as much as we can with our limited resources. We also do yard cleanups because that helps the neighboring homes, to make them feel that they are part of a community.

Our homeowners must meet financial guidelines. When they are eligible, we do not charge anything for labor or materials. The bottom right is a home in Long Beach that we did for one of our grants. We had a New York State Affordable Housing grant. We still do through the end of this year. We are supposed to do 12 homes right now. We've already done four. And we have approximately three more or four more in the works right now.

Our clients are referred through a number of different organizations; and also we get phone calls from people who have seen our Facebook page or they have seen our website. The bottom left there is Pal-O-Mine, I believe, in Islandia. We did that a few years ago. It was a ramp and a platform so that the physically-challenged could mount and dismount the horses. The top left is Heroes At Home. We received a grant from Sears to do a veteran's home.

We have approximately 200 volunteers. The majority are skilled. Those that are unskilled are taught on the job. And if we do need licensed people, then we have qualified contractors, which we pay for, by the way. We work all year-round. Since we are retired, majority of us are retired, they would only like to work two days a week. So two days a week all year round they are working from 8:30 in the morning 'til approximately three or four in the afternoon. And we try to provide safe and accessible homes for everybody.

Now, this house was in Middle Island (referring to a slide in the PowerPoint). I think the Legislator of that district maybe understands that. This was requested by another non-profit for us to refurbish. And obviously we as -- because of our age, we don't go up on the roof anymore, but a contractor decided that he would donate the roof and he also did the surrounding siding. But we refurbished the interior. And this is what it looks like today. We went and did the flooring, the inside of the windows, the molding, the painting, everything that you could think of, the stairway on the outside; plus we decided to make it look pretty for the neighborhood and we put in landscaping.

We've repaired 231 homes. I have a list for every year of jobs completed and this is how I found out for your specific areas. We did 94 in Suffolk County and 45 were in your Legislative Districts. That's not a lot. It's about 41% in Suffolk; 48% of that in Suffolk is in your Legislative District. We are sorely in need of clients. We would love to help more people and it has been a little bit of a problem. Since the organization started in Nassau County, that's probably one of the reasons why we have the majority of the homes in Nassau. They are much more familiar with us. Of those homes, 35 were Sandy-damaged homes. We have since received another -- excuse me -- another grant and that requires, as I said before, 12 homes by the end of this year. We've already started -- completed three and started four others.

Donations come from individuals. We have quite a donation list. Foundations, corporations, community groups and grants. We have a wonderful grant writer. We do not have an executive director any longer. He retired in 2014. We had a bookkeeper who worked part-time. She retired

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in 2014. And our President, he passed away last May. I was asked to be the President and CEO starting in June and we are trying very, very hard to upgrade a lot of our areas. Now, we don't have an ED so our volunteers have stepped up. We have a wonderful grant writer. We have two people who are working on our bookkeeping. And it has been working out very well but slow.

And we are committed to not being the best kept secret especially in Suffolk County. So if you know anyone in your districts who need help, please let us know. If you know of anyone who is interested in volunteering, again, please have them call our office or go on-line. Our website contains the volunteer application. And if you or anybody in Suffolk County Legislature can support us financially, we certainly would appreciate it. Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you, Barbara. That was great. I could have a whole list for you ready. I think we'd all have a list for you within a couple of hours, if anything.

MS. NILSEN:

Well, that's wonderful. That's wonderful. We -- our volunteers go out and we have first responders -- what we call first responders. They are our home visitors. They go to the house. They assess what is -- what they feel is necessary, and they're pretty well experienced by this time. And then they bring it into the office and we approve or deny but -- based upon finances. And then it goes to our crew, our construction manager.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. I know we have some questions for you.

MS. NILSEN:

Good. Wonderful.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Yes. I'll pass it over to Legislator Calarco.

LEG. CALARCO:

Good afternoon.

MS. NILSEN:

Good afternoon.

LEG. CALARCO:

Perhaps you mentioned this earlier, did you used to exist under a different name; different entity?

MS. NILSEN:

It used to be Christmas in April.

LEG. CALARCO:

I knew it. I remembered from way back when I first started in the County, there was an entity and I lost track of you. And quite honestly I get quite a few phone calls of people looking for help. And I think what you do is great and I'm glad I have your information now --

MS. NILSEN:

Thank you.

LEG. CALARCO:

-- so we could pass it along. What I would also recommend is we ought to get you in touch with

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our Director of The Office for the Aging, Holly Rhodes-Teague, because they have a resource guide, a whole book that they put out for seniors and we'd love to get -- I think we should get you into that resource guide.

MS. NILSEN:

We are in there.

LEG. CALARCO:

Okay, great, great.

MS. NILSEN:

Oh, yes.

LEG. CALARCO:

Because that should be a good resource of getting you referrals of people who need help.

MS. NILSEN:

Absolutely.

LEG. CALARCO:

Thank you very much for what you do.

MS. NILSEN:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

That's great. Legislator Browning.

LEG. BROWNING:

Yeah. You said there's an income criteria?

MS. NILSEN:

Yes.

LEG. BROWNING:

So what is that criteria to be eligible?

MS. NILSEN:

For our regular homeowners, since we are doing low income mostly, it is \$40,000 for one person in the home and 5,000 per person thereafter.

LEG. BROWNING:

And this is strictly seniors?

MS. NILSEN:

No.

LEG. BROWNING:

Oh.

MS. NILSEN:

No, absolutely not.

LEG. BROWNING:

How did I miss that? And -- yeah, actually I do have a family right now who's a veteran who needs upgrades in his home. And they -- they may be very interested. I'm certainly going to make sure I get it to her today. But too often I get, you know -- we get phone calls, especially seniors, with limited income, that are having issues with yard work, you know, an 80-year-old woman who can't -- you know -- now they -- you have to bag everything where you used to be able to put it out at the end of the driveway. So you kind of do those winter cleanups?

MS. NILSEN:

We certainly do. Unfortunately I didn't have this picture on PowerPoint, but there were three ladies, including myself, who went to this elderly woman's home. And she had been told by the Town that she'd better clean up her front yard. And --

LEG. BROWNING:

I've had that.

MS. NILSEN:

And even -- okay. Even though we had done some interior repairs, this was most important to her and obviously to the neighbors. So we went one Saturday, three of us, and we took care of the entire front. And there were something, like, 17 bags, I mean (indicating) big bags. And the lady came out hobbling. And she just had tears in her eyes. That's our satisfaction; that we will make somebody safe in their home and happy. That's the main thing. That's what we do.

LEG. BROWNING:

It would be nice if neighbors would pick up and -- especially, you know -- because I know we do it for our neighbor --

MS. NILSEN:

Absolutely.

LEG. BROWNING:

Well, before she passed away. And we would help her out, especially when it snowed, but, you know, when I hear senior citizens getting tickets from the town because you didn't clean up your front yard from the winter, it's like that's -- that's really shameful.

MS. NILSEN:

I would say so.

LEG. BROWNING:

But I guarantee you'll be hearing from us.

MS. NILSEN:

That's wonderful. If you need any more brochures to put in your office --

LEG. BROWNING:

Yes.

MS. NILSEN:

-- please let me know. I think we have quite a few here. But, if not, we have a brand new brochure that is right now being printed. Plus, we have a special veterans brochure that will be going around to all the American Legions. And I have a gentleman who is First District Commander so he is very much interested in seeing what we can do.

LEG. BROWNING:

As far as the veterans are concerned, because this is a disabled vet, is there a different criteria for veterans?

MS. NILSEN:

(Shaking head no)

LEG. BROWNING:

It's all income –

MS. NILSEN:

If he is slightly above financial -- our financial requirements, there's always a way to make an exception.

LEG. BROWNING:

Okay.

MS. NILSEN:

And we do the same with some of the elderly people as well. It depends. It depends upon the type of circumstances that they are under. Plus, we have done -- I believe it's -- where was it? Accardi, I think he's in Centereach. I don't know whether any of the Legislators are Centereach, but you may have seen it on --

LEG. KENNEDY:

Me.

MS. NILSEN:

Okay. You may have seen it on News 12, the Accardi family. They have a three-year-old and a four-year-old who have neuromuscular terminal -- you recall that?

LEG. KENNEDY:

Yes.

MS. NILSEN:

Well, we will be there in about two or three weeks depending upon the plumbing going in. We will be putting in probably about close to 200 sheets of sheetrock they have asked us to do. And we will do it. Now that's -- they make a little more money than most people, but it doesn't make a bit of difference, we're trying to help out a family, you know.

LEG. BROWNING:

Have you -- have you ever reached out to the building trades? Because a lot of our -- I had an issue -- a little outside my district a VFW that needed a lot of help. And I reached out to the building trades. And they do have a volunteer program where they do volunteer their services. We needed electrical work done so obviously we needed skilled labor for that. And they do offer their services for many projects. And I know sometimes they're pretty busy but I think they would be a good avenue for you in the event that you did need help.

MS. NILSEN:

We'd like to get that information. I thought, Frank -- Frank, you were talking about something else, I think, in the contracting world.

LEG. BROWNING:

Yeah, the Nassau Suffolk Building Trades, we can certainly give you the contact for them and, you

know --

MS. NILSEN:
Good.

LEG. BROWNING:
They could be another avenue when you're needing somebody with skilled labor.

MS. NILSEN:
We've been very fortunate. We have a volunteer who works for National Grid. And I have had this year so far three homes that had no heat in the winter. And he went out to assess what was necessary. And then we also have a qualified contractor who will come in at a discount, thank goodness, and he has replaced parts and he has replaced hot water heaters in total and done a wonderful job. We're very fortunate that way that we have that type of a contact.

We also have a contact with the Electrical Institute, which is based in Copiague. They train future electricians. And they will come and do electrical work for us and bring their students so there is no labor. It's just our materials they're charging. So we're very fortunate in that respect.

LEG. BROWNING:
Well, thank you for everything you're doing.

MS. NILSEN:
Thank you very much for having me. I appreciate it.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:
Thank you for coming. I do have a couple of questions myself. Really, you answered the funding part and -- as well as the financial guidelines. But what happens if a family does not own the home, they rent; what would be the circumstances under that situation?

MS. NILSEN:
That's a little tough because if they needed a ramp, for example, a wheelchair ramp, we have a letter that has to be notarized by the landlord to state that he allows this ramp to be built on his property. That we will do. Interior wise, no. I think the suggestion to the landlord would be, for example, a grab bar, we'll tell him, will you allow us to put a grab bar in? This -- we're concerned with the safety, but talking about interior cabinetry and things like that, that's really the responsibility of the landlord so we have a little bit of a difference there.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:
Okay, great. Do we have any other questions? All right, well, thank you both for coming. Frank, I know -- I don't know if you had something to say. I know you wanted to.

MR. ZAMBANINI:
She mentioned about the electrical school.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:
She answered it. Okay. So, again, thank you both for coming today. You will be hearing from -- definitely from my office and you've heard from other Legislators here today as well. And thank you for all that you do and we'll be in touch.

MS. NILSEN:
Thank you so much.

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CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you.

MS. NILSEN:

You have a good day.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

You, too. That concludes our presentation. And there's no further business before this Committee, this meeting is adjourned.

THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 1:36 PM