

VETERANS COMMITTEE
OF THE
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE
MINUTES

A meeting of the Veterans 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. Steven H. Stern, Chairperson
Leg. Sarah S. Anker, Vice Chair
Leg. Monica Martinez
Leg. Thomas F. Barraga (excused absence)
Leg. Lou D'Amaro
Leg. Leslie Kennedy

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Sarah Simpson, Assistant Counsel/Legislature
Jason Richberg, Clerk of the Legislature
Amy Ellis, Chief Deputy Clerk/Legislature
Andrew Tarantowicz, Budget Review Office
John J. Toomey, Presiding Judge/SC Veterans Court
Eric Bruno, LCSW/SC Veterans Court
Ralph Zanchelli, VA mentor/SC Veterans Court
Frank D'Aversa, VA mentor/SC Veterans Court
Ron Pacchiana, VA mentor/SC Veterans Court
Grace Mehl, VA mentor/SC Veterans Court
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Justin Littell, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
Robyn Fellrath, Aide to Leg. Anker
Ali Nazir, Aide to Leg. Kennedy
Robert Martinez, Aide to Leg. Muratore
Michael Pitcher, Director of Communications/PO
Seth Squicciarino, Aide to Leg. Hahn
Katie Horst, County Executive's Office
Robert Braun, Deputy Bureau Chief/County Attorney's Office
Rick Brand, Newsday
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer
Kim Castiglione, Legislative Secretary

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 9:40 AM

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

All right. Good morning everyone and welcome to the Veterans Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature. I would ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Anker.

SALUTATION

I ask you to remain standing to join us for a moment of silence keeping all of our brave men and women fighting for our freedom overseas in our thoughts and prayers.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Thank you.

Okay. Again, welcome everybody and thank you for joining us today. Please note for the record that Legislator Barraga will not be joining us. He has an excused absence today.

PRESENTATIONS

But we do have very special guests with us this morning who are going to share with us important information, important information that we all need to know as Legislators and in our district offices as far as services that are available to an important population within our Suffolk County community and, of course, is our veterans. And so representing the Veterans Court today is the most Honorable Judge Toomey. Thank you, Judge, for being with us today and members of your team. And so we're going to learn a lot about the needs of our veterans and specifically the services that are offered by the Veterans Court, important information, as I said, for us to take back to our offices so that we have the information to best serve those that have served us. And so with that, Judge Toomey, welcome to you and, again, thank you so much for being with us today.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Thank you very much, Legislator Stern. And thank you to the Committee for having myself and Eric Bruno from the VA and the mentors wearing the green jackets that also work and help me a great deal in the Veterans Court.

Just historically, briefly, the Veterans Court came to Suffolk County February, 2011, and we've been in existence since then. When it came to Suffolk County, we're only the second Veterans Court in New York State and one of the very few in the United States. Since that time it has grown unbelievably, almost every County in the State has Veterans Courts and they're certainly all over the rest of the Country.

What we have in the Veterans Court, I think, is actually Congressman Israel, many years ago, saw that -- a lot of people saw it, but he really took control of the situation, saw a lot of our veterans coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan were coming into the criminal justice system. They were suffering from what they call PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, traumatic brain injury, and a lot of it was personifying itself. They were acting out and using drugs, drinking and sometimes domestic violence, fighting. And the crossroads would come with the criminal justice system to identify that these people definitely needed help, much more help than a lot of other people coming into the system. As a result, the Veterans Court was born.

I'd say at this point we must have had at least -- this being an estimate by my point, at least 200 veterans come through the court. Currently we have about 40 in the court. And what happens is a

veteran comes in, he's identified as a veteran. He works out a disposition with the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office, signs a contract and he's bound by the contract. One of the most clear elements in the contract is that he must get treatment through the Veterans Administration, and that is set up by Eric Bruno sitting one seat over from my right, who will address those items later.

But while he's in the court he must avail himself of the Veterans Administration, of their rehabilitation, and if he successfully does that on a misdemeanor for one year, he'll get a reduced -- certainly a reduced sentence. A lot of times a reduced charge. If it's a felony it'll be 18 months. Never does a veteran complete the Veterans Court and go to jail. The most he would get -- he or she, I should say, would get -- would get a probation sentence.

It's been something that, you know, I've been very proud to preside over. I have to say the Veterans Administration works in unbelievable closeness with the Veterans Court. They have a vast array of services I think that's really almost under the radar, people don't realize how much they do do for the veterans. And it's not in any way for these veterans a free pass. If they are not successful in the Veterans Court, a jail or a prison term will be given out to them. Fortunately that very, very rarely happens, but on occasion not everybody can complete it. And, as I said, it's not a free pass. Some of these veterans in rare cases do end up being incarcerated.

Presently the District Attorney's Office in Suffolk County we're getting veterans in here that have, you know, actually facing breakouts. If they are not successful, they can be doing many years in State prison. I think we just brought somebody in about a month ago, an armed robbery with, you know, a lot of reasons and situations with it where if he's not successful, he's going to do four years in State prison, so it's certainly not something that's taken lightly. It's not something if he does not do what he's supposed to do, he just walks away. The penalties can be -- can be quite high, but there's certainly a benefit for him in that he can get -- this person, if he successfully completes it, he'll do no jail at all and hopefully he'll straighten himself out. And that's really what we want to do, we want to help these veterans get from where they are now back to the situation they were while they were in before they went into the service, because it's our belief that most of these people wouldn't have these issues if they weren't in that situation, mostly in combat situations.

If you go -- we're in session every other Tuesday. And if you go to my court on a Tuesday morning in Central Islip when we're in session, you'll see a lot of men and a few women wearing green jackets, and some are here with us today. These are the mentors of the Veterans Court. They work with each and every veteran defendant and give them counseling, mentoring, help them get through it. And then almost all of them are Vietnam veterans and they remember all too well when veterans weren't held in the same esteem that they are now. And their creedal is never to leave, you know, another veteran -- one group of veterans would never leave another group of veterans behind. They certainly practice what they preach and they're in the court all the time. Mr. Ralph Zanchelli will speak to you, I'm sure, in a few moments.

There also is a jail component. They go out to the jail approximately once a month. Every so often I do go out there with them and I have to -- you know, I can't be more proud of how these people have responded to the court.

We've gotten a lot of accolades in the court, both in the State and actually throughout the country. I've been asked to speak in different areas of the country on the Veterans Court and setting up Veterans Court and how we do it and how it works here. And it's always my feeling and belief from the bottom of my heart that the reason that this court works so well is because of the mentors that we have in there; that coupled with Eric Bruno, it makes it as successful as it is.

All of us, we have one focus in mind, one goal, and that is to help as many veterans as we possibly can. And we're doing that step by step, week by week in the best way that we know how. And at

this point it seems like it's working very well and we hope for the day that we don't have any more veterans coming into the program because there aren't any more wars or any more veterans coming in, but at this point it's certainly our privilege -- certainly my privilege and honor to be the Presiding Judge of this Court. And it's something that, you know, I've said it many times, with everything I've done as a lawyer and a Judge, outside of my family I think it's the proudest -- proudest thing in my life is being the Judge in the Veterans Court. And I say that only because of the great help I get from my mentors and from Eric Bruno.

If you have any -- unfortunately I'm also a sitting County Court Judge and I have a hearing scheduled at 9:30, which I'm not going to make in Riverhead, but I must leave, but I'd be certainly very happy to take any questions that some of the Legislators or Aides may have.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Well, Judge, again, and knowing the time constraints that you have, I really appreciate you being with us this morning. And to say thank you to you. You are certainly blazing a trail because much of what you and your team is handling is groundbreaking and you are really setting the course not just for the State but really for the rest of our nation. And so we are all grateful to all of you for that.

I'm wondering, Judge, that's interesting because you point out that the mentors who are there in the courtroom wearing the green jackets so they are clearly identifiable, and I'm sure that brings comfort to those that are standing before you, and I think that's an important element. But I think it's also important to point out, at least this was one of my observations when I was with you in the court, what's not being worn, and that is the black robe. And you'll preside and clearly it's a formal setting; clearly it's a courtroom and has to be taken very seriously, but you can also tell that it's something different going on in your courtroom, Judge, that -- that you're looking at these cases and charges being faced and those that -- who are facing them in a different way. And I'm sure that that's much appreciated by those that you preside over and those that you have the opportunity to work with.

Question for you, Judge, is from a legal perspective. Are there any cases that will not be referred to your court? And then maybe if you can touch on maybe the cases that you tend to see the most.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Well, certainly if we have a very victim-sensitive crime, it won't come in -- where actually I don't want to speak about it now, but maybe if I come back I'll be able to talk about it at another time, where there is somebody -- maybe coming in where there was a -- there was a death, somebody was -- lost a life in the crime, but they may or may not come in. There are extenuating circumstances. But for the most part, if you have serious, serious physical injury, if you have, you know, like a homicide, something like that, they're not going to get into Veterans Court. Obviously you're not going to let them come in and not do any jail time.

Most of the crime -- almost all the crimes we have, they have like a mental health component, whether it's PTSD, it's traumatic brain injury, it's alcohol, it's drugs. They have to come in with something that we can treat. If the guy's just a drug dealer, he has no -- no drug problem or anything like that, he's just doing it as his job, he's probably not going to get into the Veterans Court. He has to have some type of thing that we can actually -- we can treat, that Eric can set up a course of treatment for him, he can follow it and rehabilitate himself.

Most of the cases that come in -- I could almost tell you a hundred percent of the cases that come in all have drug and alcohol components. And these are acted out in several ways. It could be by fighting, it could be by possession -- possessing weapons, it could be operating a motor vehicle under the influence, it could be stealing. There's a lot of -- domestic violence could come into the

Veterans Court, a lot of things like that. The only thing that we wouldn't take would probably be very, very serious felonies wouldn't come in. And now that they're almost coming in now under certain circumstances where I said we had an armed robber come in -- armed robbery with, you know, extenuating circumstances, but I would say two or three years ago they wouldn't even approach something like that and now they're actually getting in. We're working on one that it was a homicide that may come in depending on the family's reaction to it. But I would say we're going further and further to more serious crimes, but there'll always be a break off, certainly a murder or a very serious manslaughter, rape or kidnapping probably would -- would never come in.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

And are those determinations made by the District Attorney's Office?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

The District Attorney's Office is the gatekeeper. Before a person can come into the -- into the Veterans Court they must make a deal or a disposition, a plea bargain with the District Attorney. And they will then come in, they will take a plea before me. So everybody before my -- in my court that is actively in the court has already pled guilty. And that guilty plea will hang over their heads until they successfully complete the Veterans Court and the treatment that Eric Bruno has dictated for them. At that point the case will be reduced and the sentence certainly will be -- will be reduced as well. But the gatekeeper is the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office. So he says go or stop; either they come in or they don't on his say so.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

I know, Judge, one of the things that you're most proud of is the record of success. And we've had that conversation, I've had that conversation --

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Yes.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

-- with many in the mentor program but maybe you can share with the rest of the committee what some of those statistics are.

(The following was transcribed by Kim Castiglione, Legislative Secretary)

JUDGE TOOMEY:

It's hard to quantify it, but I would say the mentors and probably Eric could give you a better reading on it. I would say we are at approximately 95% success rate. It's extremely high. And not only is it -- a lot of times even after they leave the court they're still get -- they're still going to the VA, excuse me, for their treatment, they're still in touch with us. Some do fall off, but they always have those tools now to get back into the game, to get back into, you know, a sober and clean lifestyle. So I would say it's extremely high, so high I don't really want to talk about it because we don't want to jinx anybody. But I'd say it's close, between 95 and 97%, something like that, success rate at this point.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

I just want to thank you for all the work that you've done, all the folks here volunteering and your efforts, you know, in helping those that are in need, especially, you know, pertaining to our military. You know, I'm working with Sheriff DeMarco and several years ago I worked on a resolution focusing on putting those facts on paper, creating a peer review report from Stony Brook University, working

with their interns, to clarify that rehabilitation works much better than just incarceration. Years ago, decades ago, it was just incarceration and the recidivism was just incredible. And so it's good to hear that not only are we, you know, moving towards the rehabilitation perspective, but also focusing on our military.

So let me ask you a question pertaining to increasing the success of having those folks go through rehabilitation, of course dealing with the mental illness or drug dependency, but what about the, you know, stabilizing factors like jobs. Are you able to connect those veterans that have gone through the counseling, the mentorships, and placing them in a stable environment so they don't come back with the incarceration?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Thank you very much for the question. It's certainly a component of the Veterans Court. I believe a lot of veterans come in, they're already working. I mean, they are not always, you know, really down and out. A lot of them do have jobs. Some have good jobs. We have pilots in the program, we have attorneys in the program, so they're not all -- but there are some naturally that are struggling with jobs. We do have job counseling. I'm sure Eric will talk more about that. We have training for them.

When a veteran comes into the criminal justice system and into the Veterans Court, they have like a foot up on other treatment courts, you know, compared to Drug Court or domestic violence or mental health because of the VA component. We have shelter for them if they need it. They have transportation, they have certainly rehabilitation. They have job counseling, they have the ability to get an education, to get trained in different fields, so they do, to answer your question, they do have all that. I would say, though, a good 60 -- we have New York City firemen come in, police -- I mean, we have a lot of people coming in that already have jobs, but the people that don't, there's certainly a component there where once they're sober great things happen for them.

We have a few that actually started working at the VA after they left the court. So it's very rewarding. Some guys come in already retired. I mean, it's really a very strange thing. I don't know if we see it that much, but about two or three years ago a lot Vietnam Veterans retired and kind of went off and they came in, and some have stayed around and become mentors, believe or not, and others are already retired. But there certainly is, our position is to get them -- we have one guy just works on union jobs for them, so we do have a lot of things that they can do once they have successfully completed the program.

And I agree with you, Legislator Anker. I mean, rehabilitation is so much better than incarceration, and it's something if you really have people that really want to work with you, that really want to be rehabilitated, it certainly is the way to go. There's a small percentage just aren't going to get it, but the rehabilitation is so much better than incarceration. It really doesn't do society nor anybody else any good at all.

LEG. ANKER:

Right. And one of the reasons, too, I wanted to put this information in a document was to have the jail apply for funding, because if we're spending our taxpayer dollars to try to help people, you know, let's make sure it's being put in the right place. And again, you can lock up a person and pay the guards or whatever, but you are not doing anything, you're not helping society. By rehabilitation, mentoring, you know, again, I would like to hear more what you're doing, but I do feel it's much more successful. And again, I don't want to jinx you either, 95% is just remarkable.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Yeah. I hope -- you know, that's kind of like my figure, and I'm not under oath so I guess I can say -- but it's very high and it's, you know, very rarely do we have somebody that doesn't make it.

Okay?

Legislator Stern, thank you very much. I must run out to Riverhead, but I'm sure I've just really breached the tip of the iceberg. I'm sure the mentors and Mr. Bruno will give you, you know, a much more comprehensive idea of what we do there. But again, thank you very much for having me and the mentors and Eric, and I look forward to coming before you again in a year or so. Okay? Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Thank you. Eric, maybe before we start to talk about some of the particulars of the treatment, maybe Ralph, and Frank, you can introduce yourselves and other members of the mentor program team that are will us today as well.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

My name is Ralph Zanchelli. I'm one of the mentors in the Suffolk County Veterans Court. I'm going to let Eric speak a little bit about the treatment first before we talk about the mentors. Thank you.

MR. BRUNO:

To kind of give a little bit of an overview of just the timeline of things. The veteran -- really it's an attorney driven process for a veteran to get into the Vets Court. So typically when I ever speak anywhere I think the thing that I want to come out of it is that really attorneys need to know, and they need to know this is a viable legal option for their clients, because if their attorney is not going to look into it and to have a discussion with the ADA assigned to the case, it's not going anywhere. So I think that's really the most important thing, is getting the word out, and we do that through our successes, but also in meetings like this, that -- to attorneys that listen. If you're -- ask your client are you a veteran. Regardless of their age or gender, are you a veteran, have you served in the military. And if they have then know that the Veterans Court is one legal option to pursue.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

I'm sorry to interrupt, but do you have any idea, does anyone have any idea what the percentage might be, those that come into the Veterans Court that are represented by outside private counsel as opposed to those who are working through say court appointed attorneys or Legal Aid, Public Defender's Office, that kind of thing.

MR. BRUNO:

I would have to say maybe 60/40 private. I think what Judge Toomey was alluding to before is a lot of the, you know, the veterans that come through the court, they are not homeless, in danger of homelessness, it's really just a preventive measure from the VA's perspective where homelessness and veterans are concerned. A lot of them, DWI's -- they have jobs, they've made mistakes and they're willing to go into treatment to do what they need to do. I would say that that's probably a good solid 70 to 80% of the vets that we work with have jobs or are going to school on the GI bill or have a life that they want to hold on to, and that is a great incentive for them that they can come into this court, eventually -- I don't know if the Judge went into it -- but eventually have their charges reduced as per their contract. When it's over, especially the younger OEF/OIF vets, if they have a misdemeanor DWI or any other type of charge, they have that on their record, they're going to school and they're trying to get a job and it obviously will negatively impact them, and then that's gone because they came into the court and they addressed issues that they may not have addressed otherwise. So that's really the focus of what we're trying to do.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

So you're saying, though, that people will -- the court doesn't necessarily know if they're a veteran? Is that right?

MR. BRUNO:

The Veterans Court or the courts in general?

LEG. ANKER:

The courts in general.

MR. BRUNO:

No, you know, there are methods where they will -- right when they're initially arrested or at what point is it where they --

MR. ZANCHELLI:

When they're initially arrested there is a place on the arrest report in the Suffolk County Police Department asking if they're veterans. And it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to get to the District Attorney, though.

MR. BRUNO:

Or their attorney.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

We're working on that.

LEG. ANKER:

Yeah, because that's is where, you know, you talk about the DA being a gatekeeper. On the form, I'm assuming there's so much paperwork, but there's got to be a form that needs to have that on there, and as soon as they check that off then maybe some more information, you know, if you are a veteran then you can apply for these --

MR. ZANCHELLI:

I definitely agree with everything you just said. I believe -- what we would like to see is that that form goes to the District Attorney, so when the DA gets the case they're well aware that this is a veteran.

LEG. ANKER:

So maybe, as a suggestion to the committee, maybe we can write a letter to the DA's Office or wherever that gate is, and then request that that be added to the forms. They may have to use up the old forms, but at least when the new forms are printed you'll have that little box to check off.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

That would be great. And also, we're thinking, I think the Judge is talking about it just today, that to meet with Thomas Spota, the District Attorney, in regards to that situation.

LEG. ANKER:

So -- I'm sorry, we're just kind of debating. I'm trying to clarify the actual form. What department does that form come out of?

MR. ZANCHELLI:

The one I'm talking about now, it's from the Suffolk County Police Department. There is a space, when somebody gets arrested, where they're asked are you a veteran, where did you serve, combat also is in there, too.

MR. BRUNO:

When they're arraigned and they go through the system, isn't that another question that's asked at that point?

MR. ZANCHELLI:

I'm not sure about that, Eric. I'm not sure about that. I know that it's on the arrest report. I'm not sure that if -- when they're arraigned if they're asked that question. I don't know if the Judge would be.

LEG. ANKER:

I'm looking at another document. I'm sure there's -- I assuming again. I don't know the exact court system and what the documents, you know, have, what you fill out.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

It's our belief, Legislator Anker, that where some of this stuff is falling, you know, through the loop, you know, because we can just tell.

LEG. ANKER:

Right, and we have to find out.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Yeah. I believe some of these have fallen through the loop. But I think the main person that has to get that information is from the Suffolk County Police Department to the District Attorney's Office, that when that District Attorney gets that case, looks at what the case is, and now knows that this is a veteran, you know?

LEG. ANKER:

Okay. So I think that's something very doable. We can talk to our District Attorney and see if they can make, you know, put that in the process.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Thank you. Thank you.

LEG. ANKER:

We can try. You know, again, I don't see --

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Appreciate that.

LEG. ANKER:

You're very welcome. Well, thank you again. We're trying to make your job easier because what you do is so important.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

That would help. That would help a lot.

MR. BRUNO:

To go a little bit, you know, into the timeline of events. So the case, typically it's the attorney identifies that their client's a vet. They're aware of the Veterans Court, which is a big thing. They have to be aware of it and then they will have a discussion with the DA's Office and the ADA assigned, and they'll come to an agreement that if veteran John Smith comes through the court, then he will plead guilty up front as Judge discussed, and when his time in the court is over, his misdemeanor charge will be reduced or his felony charge will be reduced in some manner. If he

does not complete the court, then he will face so much time in jail. And that's -- on the legal end that's the process. Once that is determined that's when they are sent to me. And, you know, I think Judge said before that they all have to go to VA treatment. That's not necessarily the case.

I'm going to complete a full assessment with them and I will look into jobs and I will look into housing status and I'll look into the whole person and what's going on with them, and I'll recommend treatment, we'll discuss treatment. I like the veterans to be on board with their treatment plan. It winds up being more successful that way. It's not always doable, but we have those conversations. And they'll be referred to the most appropriate treatment. As with anything else, the VA does have some limitation, so there are plenty of times where I refer veterans to community treatment and they're using whatever insurance they may have or there is a choice program which is a whole nother thing.

Once I have a discussion with them I'm not linking their crimes, I'm not doing any type of forensic evaluation where your illness is what caused this crime, that's not happening at all. There's just the understanding that if we treat what's going on with you the chances of you -- of recidivism are reduced. And that's been shown to be the case throughout the county, throughout Veterans Courts and Drug Courts prior to that.

After I establish that there is a need for treatment, and it's basically that simple, then they'll come to the court. They'll sign that contract, go over it with their attorney, plead guilty upfront, and then they're in the court. Then they come once a month or more often if they're not doing well. Right off the bat they're assigned a mentor, and you guys can kind of take it from there as to how that whole relationship goes.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

The first thing that I would like to say as a mentor, and I probably speak for all the mentors that are here, we are actually blessed to have Judge Toomey and Eric Bruno on the ground floor of the Suffolk County Veterans Court. And as the Judge said, it is a team effort. Okay. You have the Judge, you have Eric who sets up the treatment program, and then you have the mentors. I would say the biggest function that we have is to let the veteran know that we care about them. They obviously know that we're veterans and they're going to speak to us a lot better than somebody else, dealing with somebody else. And we support them.

And the way it works is really fantastic as far as I'm concerned. I have been in a lot of courts myself and it's just unbelievable the way this court works in Suffolk County. Eric and the Judge meet in his chambers and go over every case before that veteran comes up to the bench. So when that veteran comes up to the bench the Judge knows everything about what's going on. In the event that there is a situation where he's not doing what he's supposed to be doing, he is going to be told that. And if that continues, like the Judge said, it's not a revolving door. They will have break out time and they will go to jail. All right. But if the veteran is doing everything what they're supposed to be doing, it's a support thing. And the veteran and the mentor are up there at the same time. We're not behind a gate, we're actually with them. And the only ones that hear what's going on at that moment are those people and the recorder. And what's going on is tremendous support for that veteran, and that means so very, very much.

And then when they leave, the mentor walks outside with them, and if it's the first time when he is with them, the first thing he'll do is thank them for their service. You're a hero. You're our brother or our sister, and that's what we're here for, for you. And they are given a Suffolk County Vietnam Veterans card with our phone number on it, if they need us to call us any time. And we'll also go further and say if you're thinking you're having a problem, before you are going to do that, call us first. And that's really the crux of the mentors.

And as the Judge said, we go out to the Suffolk County jails. We've been doing that for 16 years and we do the same thing. We want them to know that we care about them and the creed that the Vietnam Veteran have is never again will one generation of veteran ever abandon another generation of veterans. And they're told that, too. And that's why we do what we do. And truthfully, I think I speak for all the mentors here, we get more out of this than we give, because when they go through that program and they graduate, that's our thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

You are explaining it very well.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

But it's almost you have to see it to really understand it. Having been there, I mean, you're exactly right of course. That you're standing right there with the person who is going before the Judge.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Right there.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

You know, it's one thing when you're in court and you have your counsel standing with you.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Yes.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

It's entirely different and you can see it and you can really feel it when he or she has their mentor standing next to them right up in front of the Judge as the Judge is pronouncing, you know, whatever the result of the case is going to be. You can really tell that there is something special going on there and you can really see why --

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

-- not only the -- there's a tremendous success rate, but the reasons underlying that success rate. It has an awful lot to do with the men and women wearing the green jackets.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

You can really see that. I had the opportunity to meet with a gentleman who, you know, had had challenges and we were at the Veterans Services Agency. It was at the very beginning of the process. When I was in court recently to observe, it was the same gentleman that I had seen at the very beginning of the process, and to be there at the very end of the process you can really get a feel for, you know, how important the process is to veterans and their families of course.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Yes.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

But to all of us in our community and that is due in large part to the outstanding services that you guys provide. For my colleagues who have not been to the Veterans Court, it really is an experience. And again, you do it justice by speaking about it eloquently, but it really is the kind of thing that you have to see it in order to get the true appreciations. Legislator Kennedy.

LEG. KENNEDY:

I just have a question for Eric. Are you an attorney, a psychiatric social worker?

MR. BRUNO:

I'm a LCSW.

LEG. KENNEDY:

Wonderful.

MR. BRUNO:

I'm a VA employee.

LEG. KENNEDY:

Wonderful.

MR. BRUNO:

I'm not a court employee. Just to kind of clarify. The first Veterans Court was in Buffalo and there was a Judge Roberts who identified all these veterans and felt like this was a need. He wasn't a veteran himself. He decided to treat it, you know, in a separate time from the rest of the population and it grew from there. It was successful using the Drug Court/Mental Health Court models. And, you know, right off the bat he did get the VA that covered his area involved and that was the model that's really -- it grew from there and throughout the country and the VA recognized this in '08, and it's part of the five-year plan and that continues to -- and homelessness amongst veterans. This is, as I said before, the preventive arm that, you know, if a person goes to jail their chance of being homeless goes through the roof. So if we are able to step in, provide treatment, prevent that from happening, then their chance of being homelessness in the future obviously goes down.

MR. D'AVERSA:

About the mentors a little bit. About five and a half years ago all the VSO's, veterans service agencies or organizations, were invited to become mentors; the VFW, the American Legion, the Vietnam Veterans of America, and we were the only ones that stepped up to the challenge. We, the Suffolk County Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 11, when we first started in the court and wearing the green jackets, everybody thought we were a doo-wop group, but Ralphie can't sing too good so we knocked that off. But amongst us mentors we have really a diverse group of individuals, highly motivated, know where he goes to try to help the veterans as a support group, not as counselors.

Myself, I'm a retired Navy Combat Vietnam Vet. Ralphie was Navy, Ralph Zanchelli. In the back of me I have Ron Pacchiana, who was a Navy SEAL, Vietnam, and Grace Mehl, who is a retired Navy Commander. She commanded her last combat ship of active duty, so we are very fortunate to have her.

In the beginning we had 12 mentors from the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 11 and they're handpicked, because within our chapter we have 500 members, and not everybody is back from Vietnam yet, if you know what I mean. So everybody's handpicked and we have a diverse group. We have Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine. We do not have a Coastguardsman, but Coastguardsmen did serve in Vietnam, about 8,000 of them.

Amongst us we have several bronze stars, including the Judge. He has two bronze stars for valor in Vietnam. He was a machine gunner. We also have four gentlemen with purple hearts. Four retired police officers amongst us, Suffolk County and one from the City. So like I said, we have a diverse group and that's why it works so well. Yeah, and amongst us, thank you, Eric, we have a mentor that completed the court, Special Forces. He caught the end of Vietnam, retired Army. He retired as a Captain. He was a mustang, meaning former enlisted like myself, and he has been a great asset, too, in both being a mentor it helps him a lot through his challenges, and also with his experiences he's able to help a lot of veterans that are going through the court right now. That's basically the background of the mentorship. We've been doing it five years now. Every session you'll see at least nine or ten green jackets.

One of the biggest assets we have is Grace joining us, because in recent years we've had females coming into the Veterans Court for various reasons. They did not want a male mentor, some of them, because of military sexual trauma that goes on. So Grace has been a great asset. She has dealt with 400 Marines on her ship and 300 sailors, so she mentors male and female very easily. So that's just a background of the mentors. If you have any questions we'd be glad to answer them.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Sure. About how many will an individual mentor work with at any given time?

MR. D'AVERSA:

It varies. For example, if we have a heavy combat situation, a defendant, I'll set up someone that had heavy combat in Vietnam. There's a bond there, a camaraderie automatically and a relationship. I would say amongst us we have four or five that we mentor individually. However, I just want you to know that when the court session ends, it doesn't mean we stop mentoring. For example, and I don't like to use the word I, but every one of us have done this. There's a gentleman in Veterans Court in Hampton Bays. We also go out to Hampton Bays. Judge Schiavoni, excellent Judge, non-veteran but she understands the issues. Today, as a matter of fact, this afternoon I'm picking him up from -- he lives in Missouri, this particular Coastguardsman. I'm picking him up from MacArthur, taking him out east to a friend where he is saying. He has court on Wednesday in Hampton Bays, and after court I'll take him back to MacArthur Airport and he'll fly home. He is graduating from Veterans Court tomorrow. So, you know, again, that's just an example of what all of us do to help the veteran.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

So it really is above and beyond just accompanying those that you're mentoring with court appearances.

MR. D'AVERSA:

Yes.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

And I'm sure in many situations it is well above and beyond. About how often does a mentor appear in court? Is it every mentor that appears at every session or is it on a rotating basis?

MR. D'AVERSA:

We are there at every court session, every one of us. There's 11 of us that are active right now and we're there all the time. You'll see us in the cafeteria. Ralphie normally buys coffee for us, and then the Judge comes into the cafeteria and we discuss different things there. And you'll also notice he doesn't wear a robe in court and he wears a Vietnam service tie, which we presented to him. He is in our Chapter.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Actually, one of my questions was going to be to the Judge, but I'll ask. Are those that come before the Judge aware of the Judge's background as a veteran and are they familiar with some of his experiences? I would have to believe that that is a real positive affect on the relationship between one coming up before the Judge and knowing that the Judge has essentially been there.

MR. D'AVERSA:

Actually, before court is in session, the Judge will come up to them in the courtroom and talk to them, hey, how are you doing, how's everything, even before court. And, yes, they are aware that he is a true hero and one of them. We're all brothers and sisters. It doesn't matter which war you served in, or also those that have not deployed into a combat situation. We're all brothers and sisters and they do know that he is a combat Vietnam Vet.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

So in order to maybe prevent these situations, what do you think the government can do?

MR. BRUNO:

Which situations?

LEG. ANKER:

Oh, what, you want me to clarify? When a person, whether it's drug dependency, mental instability, because it looks like that's pretty -- that's what we can focus on by helping them. But is there -- so maybe what I'm leaning towards is, is there a way that prior to men and women going off to war and fighting, is there some type of mental preparation or, you know, some type of counseling that will help them understand what they're going to be dealing with -- you know, I know, I see you are shaking your head no, and I know it's a very hard thing, but just to prepare them. We have our firefighters, we have police, we have, you know, other folks that really are put in very stressful situations, but is there something that can be done?

MR. D'AVERSA:

Well, I think on the other end of the coin, before they're discharged, six months before they're discharged, I think they should be evaluated thoroughly for PTSD and get the help that they need prior to discharge.

LEG. ANKER:

So that doesn't happen?

MR. D'AVERSA:

Not necessarily, especially the reserves being the way they are used today. In the past, reserves were supposed to be backup for the regular military that's deployed and stay stateside, but nowadays, they deploy, they come back without any counseling, because they're still in the reserves, and then they'll deploy again. You know, we've had veterans deploy six, seven times already, and they're not really getting the, in my opinion, the debriefing that they really need to be successful when they get out.

LEG. ANKER:

Okay. Maybe that's another letter we can write or something to advocate to our, you know, our military, that this is vital. What I'm working on right now is addressing the issue with drug dependency and our youth, and the fact that you can rehabilitate a person, a child, a person, but when that person is placed back into their old environment, they fall right back into the same

routine, same problems. So I'm working with the families of drug dependency youth. And, you know, it sounds like this is a very similar situation, you know, an adult going back into the situation and sometimes those family members enable that person just to go right back into, you know, having drug issues.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Anyone else?

MR. ZANCHELLI:

You know, it's important, if we're talking about the Veterans Court and they've gone through the program and they graduated and now they're going to go back into society. I'm sure -- is that the question?

LEG. ANKER:

Yes.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Okay. Well, if they have a better support group, absolutely. I mean, that's important even through Drug Courts, you know, it's the same type of deal. If they've got a great support group -- it always goes back to them. You have to remember, they have to make that choice that they want to change their lives and they made that choice, okay, when they got into the Veterans Court, went through the treatment program and graduated. Can they have a setback when they get out? Yeah, but if they had a great support and they were going to meetings and doing what they're supposed to do, because that's so very, very important whether it's Drug Court or Veterans Court. You got to keep this program up. This is part of your life now.

LEG. ANKER:

Right.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

So it's really up to them.

LEG. ANKER:

Right. And like I think you had said, we're all one family, you know, as a country and I'm a military child, a child from a military family.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Yes.

LEG. ANKER:

And, you know, to know that there is support for you and it gives you confidence, it gives you hope, and I think that's what people need the most, and you provide that.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Absolutely, absolutely.

LEG. ANKER:

Thank you.

MR. D'AVERSA:

I think what happens also when a young man or woman goes off to war, they leave their family, their mother, their father. When they come back home, the family doesn't recognize them anymore. And we faced a number of them that were put out of their house because the family said I don't

know, you're not my child anymore. They don't -- but there are programs now going on at the Vets Center and places like that where the families are now getting involved and getting help that they need.

MR. BRUNO:

I would say that that is an area that the community could help out, because the VA, while there are and there has been since I've been there a lot of expanse into family work, for the most part we are treating the veteran. You know, as you're saying, the family and the system especially with the returning vets now, that's a gigantic part of their stability moving forward. So your having that, you know, those things like the Peer to Peer Network and having things -- maybe something like for family members to have access to I think would be wonderful. I know there is some of that at the, I'm just looking at this now, at the Feinberg Clinic, which is right over there in Bay Shore and, you know, they do their own thing, but I know they do a lot of family work over there as well.

MR. D'AVERSA:

See, our generation of Vietnam Vets, I was 18 when I joined the military. A lot of us were drafted at 18, 19 years old. We didn't -- we weren't married. We didn't own a house; we didn't have a car. Today's veteran, it's so different. They're married, they have children, they're getting divorced, so they have so many different issues that we never had, you know. It's a different situation all together. They're older, a lot of them. And, again, like I said, the reserves are being utilization a lot different today than they were back in our day.

MR. BRUNO:

And the Guard.

MR. D'AVERSA:

And the Guard.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Okay. Thank you. Let me, again, reiterate and urge my colleagues on the committee, and all of my colleagues really, if you have not had the opportunity to spend time down at the Veterans Court, it really is an outstanding and very meaningful experience.

MR. BRUNO:

A quick plug. We do have our five year graduation ceremony on March 15th at 10 o'clock.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Very good.

MR. BRUNO:

And after that is a regular court session, so if you guys are around, come down.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

We appreciate that.

MR. BRUNO:

District Court, right on the second floor, Central Jury Room.

MR. D'AVERSA:

I may say that Ron Pacchiana in back of me, he is setting up for an Assemblyman or a Legislator, every court session, to come and witness what we do.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Very important.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Just one more thing. As far as that team that I talked about earlier, Tom Spota, the District Attorney of Suffolk County, is a very big part of that team, okay, and he definitely makes this court a success as well. Because I believe him and Judge Toomey talk constantly about veterans and helping veterans.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

We're certainly fortunate to have the very best working with some of our best, and so thank you to all of you. Thank you for being here. Of course thank you for your service. And thank you for your continuing to service to our veterans.

MR. ZANCHELLI:

Thank you for having us.

TABLED RESOLUTIONS

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

We do have another item on the agenda, and that is **Introductory Resolution Number 1007, Adopting Local Law No. -2016, A Local Law to provide designated parking for veterans at County facilities. (Muratore)**. I'm going to make a motion to table at the request of the sponsor today. Seconded by Legislator Kennedy. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? IR 1007 is tabled at the request of the sponsor. **(VOTE: 5-0-0-1. LEG. BARRAGA NOT PRESENT)**

There being no other business before the committee this morning, we are adjourned.

THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 10:32 AM