

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 April 5, 2016.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

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

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

George M. Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature
Sarah Simpson, Assistant Counsel/Legislature
Amy Ellis, Chief Deputy Clerk/Legislature
Andrew Tarantowicz, Budget Review Office
Tom Ronayne, Director/Veteran's Service Agency
Melissa Pandolf, SC Veteran's Services Agency
Lynne Bizzarro, Chief Deputy County Attorney/County Attorney's Office
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
Michael Pitcher, Director of Communications/PO
Ray Donnelly, Aide to PO
Seth Squicciarino, Aide to Leg. Hahn
Lynne Bizzarro, County Attorney's Office
Dave Schwartz, Newsday
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:

Denise Weaver, Legislative Aide

4/5/2016 Veterans Committee

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 9:44 AM

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Good morning everyone and welcome to the Veterans Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature. Please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator D'Amaro.

SALUTATION

Let's remain standing for a moment of silence as we keep all of our brave men and women fighting for our freedoms overseas in our thoughts and prayers. Thank you.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Good morning everyone and welcome.

Let me first note for the record that Legislator Martinez won't be joining us today, she has an excused absence.

All right. Director? And, Madam Clerk, I do not have any cards, correct?

MS. ELLIS:

That's correct.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

All right, thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Good morning.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I have very little to report to the -- to you today other than the progress on the issues that we've been discussing over the recent past committees.

I will tell you that we have scheduled the annual Armed Forces Day Ceremony, as we always do, and each of you will be receiving an invitation. I'm delighted to report to you that as our keynote speaker this year we've been able to secure Monsignor Charles Fink. Father Fink, some of you may be familiar with, is a Vietnam Veteran himself. He is fairly well known in the veterans community, he's rather revered in the Vietnam Veterans community and is also an author. Father Fink -- most significantly he is the author of a poem known as *Bury Me With Soldiers*, that he wrote during his time in Vietnam. Very well known poem. In fact, at the Northport VA Medical Center at the Wall of Wars there is a large granite panel, probably seven feet tall by four feet wide, and this poem is inscribed on that granite panel.

So Father Fink has -- has agreed to be our speaker and we're very excited about that. I've been trying to get him to where our schedules meshed for several years, and that will be Saturday, May 21, at 11:00 a.m., Armed Forces Plaza.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Very good.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

On a not so pleasant note; I will inform you that we did have, last week, one successful veteran suicide and over the weekend we had two attempted suicides, so we've been engaged again in this issue. Clearly the issue, despite the many efforts that are ongoing, is not going away. We've been having discussions both internally and externally with the veteran service organizations in the community and other members of our community to try and devise a strategy for extending in further into the community and hopefully expanding this message in such a way that it resonates with, you know, folks beyond the audience that we seem to reach regularly, you know, I refer to them now as the usual suspects. When we have our town hall type meetings, when we have our community based meetings, the audience tends to be largely the same individuals and organizations represented. We've been discussing how we can recraft this message in such a way to reintroduce it to the community in a way that they may be more receptive to engaging with it.

I think probably the form that that will take is to expand our specific message to encompass the -- the totality of the problem as it relates to our community to include veterans but certainly beyond veterans because this is a -- this is a problem that extends well beyond the veterans community. So that is a conversation that while it has been ongoing, has been -- there is a renewed sense of urgency with it.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Anybody? All right, Director, thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Okay. The other -- the one other thing that I would like to make -- to make, I guess, a formal announcement on is Legislator Stern's office and my office have been working together. Historically during the month of April, the month of April being the Month of the Military Child, Legislator Stern has, for a number of years now, hosted a -- an event that's really -- it was really quite a special event, it was always very much enjoyed by those who attended, that allowed the family members of active duty, National Guard, reservists, veterans and most specifically their children to come out and spend a day of just enjoying themselves, whether it be playing mini golf or a number of games. There was a light meal, snacks and so forth were served.

This year the Legislator and his staff had considered options or alternatives to this and what we came up with was a County-wide toy drive to -- to serve the children of these veterans and these service members, many of whom are of limited means. Many of them are living on a military income, which is not significant, and the opportunity to do something sort of, you know, outside of the box and bring a little joy to these families seemed like a good idea. So collectively with my office and Legislator Stern's office and I'm very happy that the -- the Patriot Guard Riders, whom I believe you're all familiar with, has agreed not only from the County Chapter but the New York State level executive board of the Patriot Guard Riders has agreed to participate in this effort. And we are in the process of establishing drop points at various -- hopefully it'll be an inclusive list of the VFW Posts, the American Legion Post, Vietnam Veterans of America, DAV, all of the various veteran service organizations and I am hoping, I won't tread into these waters, but I'm hoping that we would also see a -- if not all of the Legislative district offices become drop-off locations for these toys. And though April is the Month of the Military Child, it looks like we're going probably run this out through Memorial Day, which would give us sufficient time to accumulate, I think, a -- a substantial number of gifts for these children and also tie it in with the, you know, the significance of the holiday of honoring and acknowledging the -- those services members. So on Memorial Day we have, as we all know, so many of our families who have suffered losses in these wars and other wars that would also be beneficiaries of this effort. So thank you for doing that, Legislator.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Thank you, Director, as always. Okay. Anybody else for Director Ronayne today? All right.

4/5/2016 Veterans Committee

Director, thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Okay. Melissa, yeah, why don't you come on up. Melissa, welcome.

MS. PANDOLF:

I'm in training. I want his job next. So I got to listen closely.

So, good morning. I'm Melissa Pandolf, for those of you that I don't know. Good morning, Legislator Stern and Legislator Anker, it's nice to see you again.

I'm here to give you an update on the Kids Who Serve Program. For those of you that aren't aware of what Kids Who Serve is, it actually -- it's a program that came about two years ago right here with my children speaking about being children of a military mom. I served 22 years in the military. I actually just retired on March 12th so my military career is done but now I'm starting on the veterans side of the house.

So what I noticed when my children were speaking here to the Legislators is that they never had a voice in school. When I would go away for several months at a time my husband was left in charge to take care of the kids and I didn't realize, even as a mom, how it affected them until they started speaking here and they each wrote a little essay and they said, *you know, my teachers don't understand what it's like when mom goes away*, they don't get homework done, they might miss lunch, you know, my husband, you know, with four kids has a lot going on when I'm not there.

So the Legislators had asked me, you know, why is it, how come we don't know, you know, these kids aren't getting support in schools, and it's mainly because the schools are not aware that the population of military kids exist right here on Long Island. We have a lot of, you know, a very high veterans population. I think the number is somewhere around 100,000 veterans that are here, but there's also the Air National Guardsmen, the reservist, the active duty, the recruiters that all have families and children that are attending our schools and they're basically just an unknown population.

So what I did is I came up with the program called Kids Who Serve and what Kids Who Serve is, it's now a formal non-profit organization. It's a 501(c)(3) and the mission is to create awareness and educate school administrators, teachers and staff about the unique circumstances that military children face when their parents are away from home for military duty as well as when they come home, because children, they know mom and dad are leaving so they need support knowing that they're going to be gone. They're away, they need the support knowing that they are gone, and then they need help when mom or dad come home because there's a transition. Especially now with our veterans coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan, they have young families, they're young men and they have PTSD. And what happens a lot of times is these kids go into school and they may be tired that day or, you know, not functioning properly in school and the teachers, you know, just from own experience they, you know, *oh, you're up late, you know, too many video games, you know, you're up, you know, watching TV, you're not getting enough sleep*. But what they don't realize is that kid's not staying up late watching TV, it's dad's suffering from PTSD and had a rough night, so he's listening to his dad have a difficult night and he's not sleeping. Or another example is the child's waiting up cause mom or dad are trying to Skype from wherever they are. They could be stateside in Texas, like I was, they could be overseas; Skype's not working, they're waiting for their parent to call from Skype and they're up late and now Skype isn't working so they're distraught the next day in school. And all these different types of circumstances that surround children affect the

4/5/2016 Veterans Committee

kids but the teachers are not aware because they don't know the population is there.

So Kids Who Serve, one of the main missions is to identify these children and I have two ways to do that. The first one is I'm actually currently writing a bill to send to New York State that will require schools to ask, to put on their registration forms, are you a military connected family and if so, the teachers that are teaching those students need to be notified. So I'm a writing bill for that. And the other way is going directly into the school district and asking them to simply send home, as part of the registration packet, a form that asks them to self-identify as a military family and they would self-identify, and then the school district would have a compilation of papers of these military families and they would be able to connect these families should the people choose to be connected. So it's still on the parents, the school districts can't make them do anything, but at least the parents would know that there's a support system that's being built within the school districts to help -- these families can help each other.

And another part of it is I would be going into the school district with other veterans and military personnel, such as myself that have children, and we would go in and actually teach the teachers what it's like being a military child, the circumstances that they face, it's an awareness program. So we would tell them there's a population out there you're unsure of, here's some papers, this is how you can pull them in and learn who your military families are and then I would give them resources. There's a ton of websites, there's a ton of information out there, it's just that the school districts aren't aware of it.

So what Kids Who Serve does is we educate them and we put together a resource guide and it says if you have, you know, a child that's having a difficult day, here's some strategies to help him. If he's not focused in class today and he's staring that teacher would now know, hey, that's a military connected child. *Little Johnny, is mom away?* And he says, *yes. Say, okay, you know what, I'll teach you the math lesson later, why don't you write mom a note.* And that teacher would have a different way to help that child and provide support for that child in the classroom and not worry so much about the academics for just that short period of time and I think the families would feel much better knowing that their children are taken of.

So the program's underway. I should be able to launch it this summer to start going into the school districts and train the teachers. And, again, it's an awareness program for a population that's not there. I've been talking about it a lot. I went to several school districts on Long Island in Suffolk County and they're all on board with it. Everybody's on board with it, they think it's great, because a lot of it is just linking websites to the school website. So where you have parent resources, when they clicked on that, they would see military families and then they would click on that and there's all the information, because I know my husband's not going to go researching looking for resources, but he'll go to a school website and click on it and have everything readily available.

So I think it's an awareness program that's much needed. I know we don't have one and hopefully Kids Who Serve will launch in Suffolk County specifically and then grow from there. Any questions?

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Well, first of all, of course, thank you for your service and thank you for being with us. And I remember when you had your beautiful children here with you and so I hope they're all doing well.

MS. PANDOLF:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

We also say that, I'm sure my colleagues would agree, that we could ask for nobody better serving the veterans and families of Suffolk County than to have you with us.

MS. PANDOLF:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

Well, hello, it's been a while. I was wondering what, you know, you were doing. I know you were in New Jersey. Right?

MS. PANDOLF:

Yes.

LEG. ANKER:

Active or inactive.

MS. PANDOLF:

I was in the Guard and now I retired.

LEG. ANKER:

That was probably a couple of years ago. And I've had a folder on my desk, you know, and the projects I work on they stay on my desk, they don't get filed away, they literally sit there and it says Military PTA.

MS. PANDOLF:

Right.

LEG. ANKER:

And I'm like, I wonder what Melissa's up to now, and I'm so happy to hear that your not-for-profit is thriving. You know, we met with the head of the PTA for Suffolk County, Joyce.

MS. PANDOLF:

Yes.

LEG. ANKER:

And I know there was a lot of restrictions, you know, with, you know, following within those guidelines, but this is great though, congratulations.

MS. PANDOLF:

Thank you.

LEG. ANKER:

And I look forward to really getting the word out.

MS. PANDOLF:

Thank you. It's much needed, the kids need a voice.

LEG. ANKER:

They do. And, I mean, you know, we've had the programs, I think, with Tom and the -- the backpacks, you know, giving the backpacks and the goodies in there for some of the military kids. But what the children really need, they need extra attention, you know, the parent is not there and there needs to be additional, you know, guidance.

MS. PANDOLF:

Right.

LEG. ANKER:

You know, a lot of the kids -- a lot of the teachers, as we were talking, you know, a year or two years ago, the teachers just -- they don't know what those children are going through. They don't know that the parent is in the military serving.

MS. PANDOLF:

Right.

LEG. ANKER:

And, you know, being the daughter of a military veteran, you know, you just go with it, you don't think to ask, you don't think that it's a little different because you just do what you're told, kinda military style. I think this is so much needed and especially with the post-traumatic stress disorder that, you know, that situation affects the entire family and so it's so good to hear that -- that you are moving forward with this. I'm looking forward to helping you.

MS. PANDOLF:

Yes, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

So what we discussed in the past and what we all know is that the services are there.

MS. PANDOLF:

Right.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

The challenge is identifying those who are in need and connecting them --

MS. PANDOLF:

Exactly.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

-- with the services. So let me -- let me flip it around the other way.

MS. PANDOLF:

Okay.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Because the two initiatives that you mention are helping to identify those families that are in need of services.

MS. PANDOLF:

Yes.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

And to the large extent it relies on self-identification.

MS. PANDOLF:

Correct.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Why wouldn't a military family self-identify themselves as a military family? Why wouldn't -- and do you see any challenges ahead and even if it is implemented as policy, that there would be a family, a mom or a dad, who for some reason would not self-identify and then take advantage of the services.

MS. PANDOLF:

Well, traditionally, being a woman in the military, women are less likely to self-identify than men. People see me all the time at events and they have no idea, 22 years in -- I was just with Team Eva yesterday and they couldn't believe I just retired from the military, you know, and she's running for veterans.

But why military families typically don't self-identify is because we know how to handle it. You know, my husband's used to it. Most families, a lot of times it is the husband that leaves but the wife -- where she's used to it. It's part of the life, you married into it or you grew into it. It's what we know.

But what I feel is if we put the services into the school something as simple as connecting the resources to the school website, it becomes a more military friendly community and, at first, I think people are going to be reluctant to self-identify, but I think moving forward once they see -- for instance, the toy drive that I'm hearing about. I think you should put the boxes in the schools and let the schools because that could be a way into the school districts. Tell the students we don't know who the military kids are, but we're going to have a toy drive for military kids and then figure out from there, and it becomes a military friendly environment because kids do spend most of their time there, so for the teachers and staff not to know and guidance counselors not to know who their military families are. I think the more it's spoken about the more the resources are presented via sending fliers home for such things as the toy drive, it makes everything more community friendly and then people start coming forward. So I think it's building blocks.

With the bill that I'm writing it requires New York State to -- and I'm taking this from other states that have already done this and implemented it because not every state does it, I think there's ten states now. But what it is it says on your registration forms you're required to ask the question; *are you a military connected family?* And then, if so, the teachers, you know, need to know. But it is back to you can't mandate people to check off yes or no. You know, it has to be self-identification, but the more it's out there, the more it's spoken about, the more families, I think, feel that the schools truly care and want to support them, I think moving forward it will become a bigger program and a bigger aspect of it.

But, again, the initial thing is people -- we know how to handle it, we take care of it, you know. There are moms and dads that go away on business trips all the time, you know, so the kids are used to it, but when you're military -- it's a service. You're doing this for somebody else. So I think it's going to be slow for -- at first, and then I think the more awareness the bigger it's going to grow.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

That's a great idea having a partnership with the schools and an important synergy there.

MS. PANDOLF:

Right.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

And part of the message that we want to send.

4/5/2016 Veterans Committee

MS. PANDOLF:

Exactly. The whole Kids Who Serve, it's totally an awareness program. All the resources are there it's just parents don't know how to access them and school districts don't know about them. But if I go in and I educate and teach, do a PowerPoint and do that, the resources are there, you just have to look in the book.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Director.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And while selfishly I would like to say that the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency has benefited greatly by having Melissa come on board and join us on staff, really what we've been able to accomplish by adding Melissa to our team is that the residents of Suffolk County have a unique advocate in a place where some difference can be made. And the perspective, the unique awareness that Melissa possesses, and clearly her passion for this issue, I think positions us extremely well, and we've seen this already in the office, to advance a level of advocacy on this type of issue that we -- while we believe we were sensitive to it, most of us in the office are -- are parents, we're all former military, but we don't have the perspective that Melissa brings to the issue. And to have her with us elevates our ability to deliver a critical service to our clients, to our constituency, that while we have always, I think, done a good job of it, Melissa has enabled us to bring that to a new level and we're delighted to have her. I'm also delighted that, and I think you heard this as well, that she volunteered to take over the internal efforts on the toy drive and I thank you for that.

MS. PANDOLF:

Gotcha. Again, I think it's a -- it's an awareness program. The more it's out there, the more it'll grow. You know, people in general, I think, I know they've been referred to as white hats because all, you know, you think of veterans and it's the old guys at the VFW, but we're here, we're in your population. You know, some of these people are in their 20's just starting out with families, you know, and I think just people in general think of a veteran as an older person and they're just not. You have to change the face of it.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

And, you know what I think of, you know, relating to military and children is that, you know, that the popular idea in our mind is, you know, what is a military person, well, they're our heroes. And what's popular now, you know, Marvel Comics and these ideas that children gravitate to to think, *well, I want to be like that, I can reach out of my, you know, safety zone or whatever and help other people.* And, you know, that's what you guys are doing, you know, and you're a very -- you're a hero, you really are, so thank you, Melissa.

MS. PANDOLF:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

You had mentioned that -- that this is policy in a few other jurisdictions. I'd be interested to know if you had any experience with them or have heard how -- how successful they have been since implementing this type of policy and I'm wondering if there are perhaps best practices that you're aware of that you look forward to hoping to implement here more locally.

MS. PANDOLF:

Well, the State of the New Jersey, because I was stationed there, I'm friendly with the Family Readiness Section there so they're the ones that are giving me a copy of their bill that they used. I know it passed through State Assembly, it's in the State Committee right now and it was referred to the Education Committee, but it looks like it's moving forward. The cost to implement it for the State of New Jersey was \$144,000 and it was basically a system upgrade to add the radial dial to say this is, you know, in their big Department of Education of what gets reported, that it's a military connected family and then from there it's just -- it was like a one-time fix. And then as the schools are reporting all their other data, it's military connected families that's also reported, because it could see how their grades may drop, they may go up, they can see the different levels of the Department of Education in how a parent being away versus home affects the military child.

So I've been tracking New Jersey just because I've been stationed there and that's who I have a partnership with to help me write my own bill moving forward in New York, so I'm in the process of doing that.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Very good.

LEG. ANKER:

So, again, you know, what you're doing is phenomenal, but the challenge though on the other side is, you know, what we go through when try to find the veterans in need is that there's the confidentiality of those particular families. How are you working to overcome that -- that part in identifying those families?

MS. PANDOLF:

I'd have to look at the -- the way that New Jersey's running it. I know it's just a blanket -- I don't know where the kids are in the school districts, but the schools don't necessarily have to tell this person that this person's military. It's just that the schools would be aware as to who's their military. So just like any other -- like the school nurse has the HIPAA -- you know, the HIPAA Program that the school nurse knows that so-and-so has allergies but the entire school doesn't know, it's kind of a one on one. But, again, it all comes down to the parents self-identifying and then the parent saying, you know, they could self-identify and say, *but I don't want anybody else to know* or they can self-identify and say, *please connect me with other military families* because in my son's own school right now, last year I was away for five months and I had no idea that another child's mom in the same class was in Afghanistan for six months. So the two husbands are left with the kids and we didn't even know about each other, you know, and that's a great resource, especially when you have the two moms that are away versus the dads. The dads could have taken care -- you know, helped each other with, you know, Boy Scouts and soccer and all the other sports.

So, again, it does come down to -- it's self-identification, but I think the more the schools put things out there, the more families will become comfortable and it will build, because I think right now it's like *I don't want to be the first one, I'm not going to be that one*. But if we make it a more familiar term then -- then it's -- it'll evolve.

LEG. ANKER:

You know what we're missing here is a military center, right? We don't have the -- I know in -- we used to go to Tampa, they had the --

MS. PANDOLF:

USO --

4/5/2016 Veterans Committee

LEG. ANKER:

The USO.

MS. PANDOLF:

-- type of situation.

LEG. ANKER:

Right. But you could go to military stores, those big stores, what are they called?

MS. PANDOLF:

Oh, the Army Navy stores.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

PX and Commissary.

MS. PANDOLF:

Oh, the PX and Commissary.

LEG. ANKER:

Commissaries, that's it, we don't have --

MS. PANDOLF:

There's a very small one that's in Mitchell Field, but very tiny. There's not many resources on Long Island, that's why it's important to let people know where the resources are and they are out there, it's just -- nobody's going to research them. I've researched them, I have a compilation of them and I'm putting it into a guide to give to the schools, this way they have the immediate access that they would need to help that child.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Okay. All right. Well, Master Sergeant Melissa Pandolf, thank you for being with us today.

MS. PANDOLF:

Thank you. I appreciate it.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

It's always good to see you. We wish you every success with all of your endeavors.

MS. PANDOLF:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Of course, anything that we could do to be of assistance you'll certainly let us know.

MS. PANDOLF:

Absolutely, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

All right, be well.

MS. PANDOLF:

Thank you.

4/5/2016 Veterans Committee

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

And, Director, thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Sure.

TABLED RESOLUTIONS

Okay, moving then to the agenda. We have one Tabled Resolution, it is **IR 1007, Adopting Local Law No. -2016, A Local Law to provide designated parking for veterans at County facilities. (Muratore)**

This is going to continue to be tabled for a public hearing at the request of the sponsor. So I'll make that motion to table for public hearing; second by Legislator Anker. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? **IR 1007 is tabled for public hearing. (VOTE: 5-0-0-1. LEG. MARTINEZ NOT PRESENT)**

There being no other business before the Committee, we are adjourned.

THE COMMITTEE CONCLUDED AT 10:14 AM